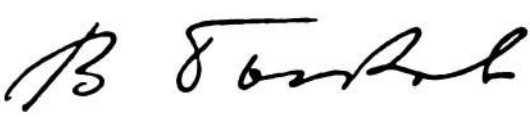
Vasil Bykov

ALPINE BALLAD
HOLD OUT TILL DAWN



Vasil Bykov

ALPINE BALLAD

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HOLD OUT TILL DAWN

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RADUGA
PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

Translation from the Russian
Designed by *P. Karachentsov, A. Chuvasov*

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АЛЬПИЙСКАЯ БАЛЛАДА
ДОЖИТЬ ДО РАССВЕТА
Повести

На английском языке

© Raduga Publishers 1989

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

ISBN 5-05-002435-8

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ALPINE BALLAD

1

He stumbled and fell, but was on his feet again in a flash. One thought filled his mind—he must run while the place was still in an uproar, he must hide, disappear, put distance between himself and the factory. Visibility was zero in the whirling vortices of dust that filled the factory shop. He all but fell into the black abyss of the bomb crater, and ran round it holding one hand outstretched so as not to bump into anything hidden by the black dust cloud; in the other hand he held a pistol. He stumbled again and rolled over a huge block of concrete torn from its place by the explosion. He jumped up barefoot, having lost his clogs in the fall. The broken concrete littering the floor caused him almost unbearable pain as he continued on his way.

There were shouts behind him, and a burst of submachine-gun fire crashed out at the other end of the huge shop.

"Like hell they're going to get me!" he muttered as he swung himself over a fallen steel girder and scrambled up a piece of crazily tilting brickwork. The dust was beginning to settle, the cloud was thinner but still dense enough to give reliable cover. Ivan reached the top of the leaning wall and from there got a view of the whole neighbourhood. The breeze that caressed him was rapidly dispersing the dust from this part of the factory. Balancing with outstretched arms he ran down a concrete beam that leaned against the wall and so reached the edge of the blast-torn area. Only three paces from him was the last obstacle, the half-collapsed outer fence; the town beyond looked as calm as though nothing whatever had happened. The streets were buried in greenery, the red-tiled roofs stood out brightly in the sunlight, and, almost within reach, on the towering slopes of the Alps, was the enticingly dark pine forest.

He took it all in at a glance, held the plastic handle of the gun between his teeth, and jumped. He had to judge his distance carefully because of the sharp iron spikes on top of the fence; but he managed to grasp two of them, and used them to swing his body over the top. Then he paused, lowered his body to arm's length and

let go, falling into the hard prickly remains of last year's sedge grass. He jumped to his feet, took the pistol in his hand and ran along the barbed-wire fence bordering the potato field.

Behind him people were shooting and shouting, dogs were barking, somewhere machine guns rattled and several bullets whistled through the air. It meant pursuit was on, and his chances were on the wane, but he could not give up the desire to escape, which by now had become dearer than life itself. He sprang over the barbed-wire fence and then ran faster than ever uphill along a cinder track, getting ever closer to the edge of the town.

The explosion at the factory must have been heard in the town. Two small boys were running full speed down the path to the factory from a little white house. The one in front was waving a toy rifle. They could not see him behind the bushes and Ivan ran as fast as he could. A girl with a watering can came from behind some acacia shrubs and almost bumped into him; she screamed with fright and dropped her can. He dashed past her down a short lane and reached the unmetalled road that marked the boundary of the town, he glanced right and left—the road seemed clear. He ran across it, forced his way through a dense plantation of dusty young trees and fell to the ground. There were no more houses in front of him, the huge steep slope was one big meadow, still unmown and white with daisies. Near the road the tops of some tall grass he had never seen before nodded drowsily in the sun; the forest began in hollows higher up the slope, and above the forest the solid mass of the Alps filled the hot July sky.

Ivan held his breath and listened. Shots and shouts came to him from way back, over by the factory; dogs were barking but, it seemed, were not chasing after him. With the sleeve of his striped jacket he wiped away the sweat that filled his eyes as he stopped to take stock of the situation. Nearby there was a gully that came closer to the town than any of the others, some skimpy fir-trees ran down into it. Ivan struggled to his feet.

Running uphill was hard going, unbelievably hard; his body grew unnaturally heavy and his legs kept giving way under him. Half way up the slope he again looked back—dogs were barking and seemed to have reached the edge of the town; a burst of fire came from somewhere not far away, he did not hear the whistle of bullets and so he guessed they were not yet firing at him. At someone else then! The prisoners had apparently scattered in all directions, this made the situation easier for him... He must run, run, run...

He had used up almost all his strength and reached the top of the first slope with difficulty. The whole town was spread out down below, he could see the long hangar-like buildings of the factory with blackened ruins dotted here and there, fresh traces of an air raid; in one place the long fence had collapsed and beyond the

gap there were twisted roof trusses–the bomb had done that. People were running about, but he could not see what they were doing. Bent double, Ivan ran weakly towards a stream (the crest of the first hill already offered partial cover), and there he at last straightened his back with relief.

He slowed down his pace and wiped his face with his sleeve. The road went up a wide, grassy gully. The slope became steeper and the stream gurgled noisily over slimy black boulders. When Ivan, completely exhausted, reached the first of the fir-trees dotted here and there on the slope, he again heard the dogs. They seemed to be close, just over the crest of the hill, and once again he mustered his last ounce of strength and ran uphill. If only he could reach the forest it would be easier to hide, and outwit his pursuers, or, if he were fated never to escape, he would sell his life at a high price.

But he did not manage to reach the forest.

He scrambled up the grassy slope, leaving behind him big and small boulders and patches of gravel and had almost reached the verge of the fir grove when from somewhere close behind him came savage barking, apparently from over the crest of the hill. Ivan dashed behind a young fir-tree and peeped through the branches: across the hill, its brown back appearing and disappearing in the grass, an Alsatian was following his scent.

He realized he would not be able to reach the thick forest, planted his feet firmly on the ground and grasped the pistol. He did not know how many cartridges there were in it and it was too late to find out although he knew full well that his safety depended on them. For a moment he relaxed his muscles and tried to regulate his breathing–he must be calm, he must stop his heart from beating so wildly and shoot to kill.

The dog saw him, bellowed more loudly and menacingly than ever and came up the slope at a stretch gallop. Ivan bent down behind the fir-tree, estimated the distance to an outcrop of stone in the grass to be something like fifty paces and aimed his pistol at it. The dog was coming on at a fast pace, its ears pressed down and its tail extended; Ivan could already see its open mouth and powerful fangs. He held his breath, made an effort to take better aim, allowed the dog to reach the stone and fired. He realized at once he had missed. The muzzle of the pistol jerked upward, a strong smell of burning powder assailed his nostrils, the dog screamed still more loudly, and he fired again, blindly, without taking aim. Then came a moment of joy as the dog wailed, spun round, crashed full length to the ground and lay writhing in the grass some twenty paces from him. He would have run for the forest but saw a second dog, a huge beast of a wolf-hound with reddish patches on its flanks, dashing at him from behind the boulders, a long leather leash after it trailing in the grass.

Ivan pushed the pistol towards the dog without aiming and pulled the trigger—no shot followed, the mechanism had seized up. He had no time to reload, he could only slap the catch smartly before the dog was upon him; with a deep growl it sprang at him. Ivan darted behind the fir. The wolf-dog flew past him touching the lower branches and, without apparently putting its feet on the ground, turned in the air and dashed at him, its mouth agape. Ivan, not knowing how to defend himself, stretched out his arms to the dog.

The animal made a fantastically powerful and precise leap. The pistol was knocked from Ivan's hand, he fell to the ground, and the two of them, man and dog, went rolling down the slope. It looked as though his end was quite near now, but Ivan, as he fell, managed to grab the dog's collar; straining his muscles to the limit he thrust the animal away. The dog clawed at him savagely, and he heard his clothing rip somewhere. With one hand Ivan kept a hold on the dog's collar and with the other he caught its foreleg and twisted it; gasping for breath, they again rolled downhill one over the other and then, to keep on top, Ivan spread his legs as widely as he could. At last he managed to press the dog to the ground under the weight of his body, and he twisted the collar to choke it. But the dog was devilishly strong and Ivan felt that he would not be able to keep it up for long. Choosing the moment, he made a last, desperate effort hitting the dog in the ribs with his knee. The animal yelped and twisted so suddenly that it almost tore the collar out of Ivan's hands, but it seemed to Ivan that something had cracked under his knee; and he twisted the collar still tighter until he felt the pain in his fingers. And yet he had not enough strength to strangle it. With a last effort, the dog strained and tore itself out of his hands.

Ivan froze, waiting for a new attack, but the dog did not jump, it lay stretched out on the ground, its tongue hanging out of one side of its mouth, panting hoarsely and staring maliciously at the man. Ivan's hands burned painfully where they had been skinned by the collar, the overworked muscles of his arms twitched nervously and his heart was beating so furiously that it seemed it would leap out of his chest. Kneeling down, he allowed his trembling hands to drop on to the grass. He looked at the dog with almost wild eyes.

They were watching each other, afraid to miss the first attempt to jump. To make matters worse, there was a chance the Germans would come. In a second or two Ivan realised that the dog would hardly jump first. He rose to his feet, and stepping to one side, picked up a heavy stone. He had meant to hit the dog with it, but then thought better of it. The animal arched its back spasmodically; it seemed to have suffered no less than the man and it was whin-

ing weakly and helplessly. Ivan took several wary steps backward, away from the dog and it, too, lifted itself from the ground and made a slight movement; its leash slid over the grass. But the animal did not jump to its feet. Ivan gained courage and ran wearily uphill to the fir-tree where he had dropped the pistol.

The dog yelped in its impotent rage, crawled a short distance over the grass and stopped. The man picked the pistol up from the grass and made his way up the gully towards the thicket of firs as quickly as his fast ebbing strength would permit.

2

In some five minutes Ivan gained the forest and ran along the bank of a swift stream of amazingly transparent water. The floor of the forest on the slope was wind-blown and clear of undergrowth, but there were stones that slowed down his pace. The slope was becoming steeper and steeper. He would have kept in the stream so as to leave no scent for the dogs, but the water was ice cold and after running a couple of dozen yards he jumped back onto the bank. As he scrambled up the steep rocky slope, he reloaded the pistol, and the cartridge that had caused the stoppage fell out onto a rock. Ivan bent down to pick it up and suddenly stood stock still—through the vociferous gurgling of the river he heard voices somewhere behind him. He left the cartridge lying there, hurried farther uphill and away from the stream, forced his way through a thick growth of young firs and dropped onto all fours, scarcely able to get his breath back.

The wind blew and the ragged edge of a dark cloud crept over the mountaintops; there would probably be rain. Ivan looked carefully in all directions and even glanced at the stones under the fir-trees—there did not seem to be anybody down below. He was about to spring to his feet and run when suddenly he heard a muffled but persistent voice calling to him:

"*Russo!*"

He crouched down lower and pulled his head into his shoulders—it could not be a German, more likely an Italian *Häftling,* a prisoner. It would be all he could do to get out of the mess himself. He knew from experience that that was next to impossible—how could he take a starved prisoner with him? The Germans had most likely raised the alarm by this time, and escaping completely was not going to be easy.

He ran uphill as fast as he could, making his way among firs and stones diagonally across the wooded slope as he no longer had strength enough to climb straight up. He left the stream well away to one side and could no longer hear its gurgling chatter; the noise

of the trees grew louder as their tops swayed in the freshening breeze. The sun disappeared behind a black cloud that spread rapidly over the darkening sky. The atmosphere was stifling, the back of his jacket became wet with sweat, at the time of the explosion he had lost his striped beret, and he now wiped his face on his sleeves, glancing all the time from side to side and listening intently. Once he heard the still distant but rapidly increasing sound of motorcycles; there was a road somewhere nearby and the Germans had already sent out pursuit patrols. Filled with gloomy forebodings, Ivan began to think desperately about what to do next; by some vague sounds he sensed that somebody was running uphill behind him. He slipped behind the mossy trunk of a fir-tree and pushed forward the safety catch on his pistol; the roar of the motorcycles grew nearer. They were hemming him in, the bastards! Ivan looked behind him, dropped on to one knee and raised the pistol in his clenched fist. From below there again came a muffled sound from among the stones, he looked down and could see that there was somebody in the undergrowth. At first he could not actually see anyone, but then the branches were slowly parted and a slight, striped figure darted out from between the trees to a tiny glade and cast a glance up the slope.

"*Russo!*"

A woman! He was so surprised that he almost cursed from chagrin, and only the approaching roar of the motorcycles distracted his attention. Ivan turned this way and that, not knowing which way to run—among the scanty trees he could easily be seen from above. He jumped into a shallow niche under an overhanging cliff and crouched there ready to beat off an attack. The striped figure below for a moment disappeared from his view. He no longer looked in that direction; wary of the motorcycles, he concentrated on listening. And then, down below, some twenty paces from him, there appeared from behind a boulder first a head, and then a body dressed in a jacket far too long for it and with rolled-up sleeves; a red triangle was stitched on the breast of the jacket. It was a girl. She looked swiftly from side to side displaying a shock of black hair that had not been cut for many a day and eyes as black as damsons that shone with joy.

"*Ciao!*"

He had heard that word often, the Italian prisoners greeted one another with it. At that moment, however, as he listened intently to the motorcycles overhead, he did not answer her, expecting that she would take some sort of cover. But she seemed oblivious to danger, again looked back and spoke rapidly in German, chasing someone away, apparently. Ivan looked towards the group of firs from behind which the girl had appeared and there, behind the boulders, he saw a man in a striped suit who, after the girl's shout,

obediently dropped back into the undergrowth. Ivan's first thought was to get away from these unwelcome fellow travellers, but the girl sprang lightly over the cliff-top, pushed her feet into clogs that she had been carrying in her hands, and ran clattering over the stones to him.

The motorcycles were roaring almost on a level with their heads and her foolish daring enraged him—they might easily be seen. Ivan bent down, stepped towards her, seized her hand and pulled the girl under the overhanging rock. Blind with rage, he muttered curses at her. She sprang lightly after him but one of her clogs suddenly slipped off her foot and flew away downhill, clattering over the stones.

"*Oi, die Klumpen!*" she screamed in a smothered voice.

The motorcyclists raced by, one after another, deafening them with the roar of their engines, but she did not seem to notice; she tore herself away from Ivan and ran after the lost clog. Ivan did not have time to hold her back, all he could do was to strike the rock with his fist in despair and gnash his teeth. The girl picked up the clog deftly and ran back, her eyes shining like those of a gambler. Ivan, unable to control his nerves any longer, angrily slapped her face.

The girl let out a little scream but did not draw back; she dropped down under the rock and the look she gave him over her elbow was more one of mischievous surprise than of anger.

They heard the motorcyclists driving farther and farther away and Ivan was already sorry he had not kept his temper. For a moment the girl tried to concentrate, opened her eyes wide and listened; it seemed that only now was she conscious of the danger that had threatened them, and, bending her knee in its stained striped trouser-leg, put the clog on. Then she again looked at him, and repeated his curses, childishly mispronouncing the words.

It was just as unexpected as his slap had been, and so unusual that something inside him seemed to snap and a spirit of humanity for a moment poured into his hardened soul; for the first time he opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

"Oho!"

"Oho!" she repeated as though mimicking him; her resentment, it seemed, was only put on. For the first time she looked him over with obvious curiosity. Her full lips were capriciously pursed, but one could see that her eyes were ready at any moment to laugh. He thought he had seen them somewhere, those incomprehensible eyes in a swarthy, wasted face; he sensed some new feeling sweeping over him and frowned at her. The girl's dazzling beauty, and her extraordinary fearlessness in their more than difficult situation were beyond his understanding.

"Where are you running to?" His voice was grim as he looked

at her feet squeezed into the wooden clogs.

"*Was?*"

"*Was! Was!* Where are you running to?"

"*Russo* run, *ich* run."

He frowned and measured her up with an angry glance–her whole mobile face with its delicate features expressed a wish to understand what he was saying and her thick, black eyebrows, that had grown together on the bridge of her nose, were raised inquiringly.

"Do you know where I'm running? I'm running Russland. If they catch me–bang, bang! And you'll get this," he ran his finger across his throat and pointed upwards, an eloquent international gesture known to all who have seen the inside of a prison camp.

She understood that and smiled for a split second, or rather snorted at him, as if to say, "What's the gallows to me!" Her daredevil recklessness again made him angry.

"Showing off! Run, then! Only not with me. I'm no helper to you."

"Yes, of course," she said with a friendly smile and he decided that she had not understood a word of what he had said.

He would have tried to remonstrate with her but at that moment shots, shouts and the baying of hounds could again be heard in the direction of the town; apparently they had picked up the scent of somebody down there. "To hell with the kid," thought Ivan. "I've got to keep going," and he began hurriedly climbing the slope.

3

A spreading grey cloud gradually covered the sky, the firs began to sway in alarm, the forest moaned uneasily and the first drops of rain slanted down between the trees.

Ivan kept going at the same fast pace, climbing up and up between boulders and trees, his bare knee gleaming white–only now did he notice that the dog had ripped his trouser-leg open. The wound on his knee seemed to have dried a little while he was hiding under the cliff, but it had opened again when he began to move and was now bleeding. His toes were bleeding, too, where he had stubbed them on the stones; something stuck in his heel was causing him pain, and he was limping badly.

Behind them everything was quiet, there was no sound of any pursuit but it was bound to come soon. Ivan knew that the Germans would not leave them be–apparently they had already ordered out security troops, police and dogs. It was next to impossible to run away. The rain might help them, hide them, deaden

their footsteps and wash away their tracks. With a piercing, uneasy glance Ivan scanned the surrounding bushes, afraid of running into an ambush. Now and then he caught the sound of his companion's hurried footsteps–she tried not to fall behind. Occasionally, however, she would stop for a moment when one of the clogs slipped off her foot, but she would run to catch up and then keep pace with him. At such times he could hear her rapid breathing somewhere nearby.

He tried to remain indifferent to her; if the girl had remained behind altogether he would probably have been relieved, but as long as she was anywhere near him he could not drive her away so as to press on alone. Why on earth did she join him? Yet she'd got away from the factory and caught him up, and that when he'd been climbing the hillside at a good speed! But, it was true, he had wasted a lot of time fighting the dogs–thank God the Germans had been delayed and had not arrived at that moment.

In the meantime the rain was getting heavier and a warm haze covered the wooded slopes–the fugitives could be glad of that, it would be easier to hide in the forest and get farther away from the town.

The going was not very easy in the rain, though. His jacket was soon wet through and stuck uncomfortably to his back, his trouser-legs were soon soaking wet at the bottoms, and so he rolled them up to the knee, as he used to when he was mowing hay back home. Ivan was glad to note that his striped clothing, usually visible over a long distance, had become much darker with the rain. If only it had not been for those accursed bull's eyes painted on the breast of his jacket with oil paint–the rain did not affect them and they became even better targets against the dark background of the wet cloth.

In this way an hour passed, perhaps more. As Ivan forced his way through wet bushes with spider's webs–on which raindrops trembled–stretched between them, he came suddenly upon a road. The concrete surface, glistening in the rain, swept smoothly round a bend and disappeared uphill. He stopped and listened–the road seemed to be empty. Then he turned round; the girl, impatiently pushing wet branches away from her face, hurried to join him. He ought to wait for her so that they could cross the road together–she might do something foolish and betray them both.

The girl came up to him, stood tiredly beside him, and appeared to be more aware of the danger when she saw the road, than she had been before. His glance took in her wet jacket that clung tight to her slim figure and frowned in annoyance–how unsuited it all was to the situation in which they found themselves. She seemed to be pleased with the momentary halt, was beginning to regain her breath a little; holding on to the thin trunk of a young

pine with one hand, she removed a clog and poured the water out of it with the other and sighed wearily.

Ivan waited patiently till her breathing became more regular and then moved towards the road; she followed him quietly and with great caution.

At the roadside he looked round again, ran to a concrete drain, stopped and whispered, "Come here!" and held out his hand to her. She grasped his fingers without a word and jumped across the drain, her clogs clattering dully on the concrete. "Take 'em off!" he snapped; the girl somehow guessed what he meant, took off the clogs and carried them in her free hand. They ran across the wet concrete road, hand in hand. The rain was growing heavier and immediately washed away their footprints. They reached the other side in safety and he released her hand. When they jumped over the ditch she cut her foot on a stone, groaned softly, thrust her feet into her clogs, and climbed quickly up the slope after him.

Here, however, the hill was steep and the scree piled up by landslides was overgrown with twisted, consumptive pines through the tops of which the glistening arc of the concrete road could be seen. Ivan no longer tried to keep up his fast pace, he was tired himself and he felt that the girl had almost exhausted her apparently not very great strength. Fighting against fatigue, he went up the steep slope first; he paused under a big, spreading pine and watched his companion scramble up. One of her clogs came off and clattered over the stones downhill. "*Santa Madonna!*" she cried out, looked back and then sat down, tired out; apparently she could not make up her mind whether to go after the clog. Soon, however, she limped down, picked up the clog and then looked up towards Ivan. Her glance expressed silent gratitude for his not having gone on without her. He dropped quietly to the prickly, dry ground between the twisted pine roots and waited for the girl to come over the brow of the hill. When she reached him she dropped down exhausted beside him.

"Chuck 'em to hell!" he said, meaning the clogs.

She turned her big black eyes on him and he pointed to her clogs and waved his hand–chuck 'em away, he said in gestures. She seemed to understand, shook her head and wriggled her tiny wet foot that seemed altogether too tender for such travel and he realised the absurdity of his advice; he also realised that those huge, oversize clogs were going to cause her a lot more trouble.

His own feet had been scratched and cut by the stones and fallen branches; they were bruised and burning, and his left heel caused him considerable pain when he walked. Now, to make their short respite longer, he decided to see what was wrong; grasping his foot with his hands he looked at the wet sole.

"*Russo* very, very *furioso.* How you say that *deutsch? Böse!*" she suddenly exclaimed.

In his year in the camp Ivan had learnt a little German; he understood what the girl meant but did not answer her immediately. There was a thorn in his heel that he tried to pull out, but try as he would he could not get hold of its tiny end.

"*Böse!* They drive you to it, they make you *böse,*" he said angrily, and then added in a more kindly voice, "On the whole I'm *gut.*"

"*Gut?*"

She laughed, smoothed her glistening wet hair with both hands, wiped them on her trousers and moved towards him.

"Oh, let me!"

He could not get hold of the tiny thorn, but she took his big foot in her thin, cold hands, fumbled for the splinter with her fingertips and then bent her head and pinched the skin of his foot with her teeth. He made a move to withdraw his foot, but she held it and again felt for the end of the splinter with her mouth. When she raised her head the tiny thorn was between her even teeth.

Ivan showed no surprise and did not thank her; he stretched his foot out, looked at the heel, rubbed it and tried to step on it—it seemed better. He gave the girl a more friendly glance than he had done before and studied her swarthy wet face that had become even prettier. Still smiling and looking him straight into the eye, she took the splinter from between her teeth and threw it into the wind.

"Pretty clever, aren't you?" he said grudgingly, as though he were unwilling to admit her worth.

"Cleffer," she repeated, and then asked, "What is cleffer?"

It was then that he smiled inwardly, probably for the first time that day, and ruffled the wet hair on the back of his head with his fingers.

"How can I explain? Something like *gut.*"

"*Gut?*"

"*Ja, gut.*"

"*Du gut, ich gut,*" she informed him gleefully and then smiled. He looked at her longer than he had done before, as if he was trying to recall something or was weighing something up. Her expression changed instantly and she shrugged her shoulders slightly, as if with cold; he thought it was time they moved on. Reluctant though he was to leave the shelter of the big pine, he forced himself to get up. The rain still kept on and the forest moaned with mournful monotony—the bad weather seemed to have stopped the man-hunt. He had no idea how many prisoners had escaped into the mountains, but perhaps someone would be lucky enough to get away. Ivan recalled the third *Häftling,* the one who had run

after them, and before leaving their shelter he turned to the girl who was shaking the water out of her clogs.

"Who was that running after you?"

"Running? There? *Häftling, tedesco Häftling.*"*

"Who was it? A friend? A comrade?"

"No was comrade. *Häftling... krank...* sick..." She tapped her forehead with a thin finger.

"Oh, crazy?"

"*Ja, ja...*"

"So you can talk to her!" thought Ivan, pleased at the idea, and turned his gaze away from her. For some reason he still felt awkward when he looked into her wide open eyes that betrayed so many different feelings.

"All right. To hell with him. Let's go."

They seemed to have got well away from the camp, the Germans had obviously lost track of them, the tremendous nervous strain was fading, and Ivan began to think back over all the details of what had happened that day.

4

From early morning five of them, prisoners of war, had been digging out an unexploded bomb in a factory shop, half-destroyed by the previous night's air raid.

The prisoners had already lost all hope of survival in that death camp, and the only thing they gave any thought to was the urge to make their escape or, as the sharp-tongued little prisoner nicknamed the Beetle put it, to slam the door hard on this world, if they had to leave it.

Their dangerous and far from easy job was coming to an end.

They lifted the bomb on crowbars to get it free of the rubble and, holding it by the twisted stabiliser, laid it carefully on the floor of the pit. The most risky and the most important part of the job came next. While the others held their breath and stood stock still beside the bomb, a long-armed fellow dressed like the others in the same striped jacket with circles painted on back and breast, Golodai by name, a sailor from the Black Sea Fleet, fitted a spanner to the fuse and leant on it with all his weight. The muscles stood out on his bare arms, the veins on his neck became prominent, and the fuse moved slightly; Golodai gave the spanner a couple more turns, putting all his strength into it, and then began quickly unscrewing the thing with his hands. The fuse, of course, was a dud and had been badly battered when it struck the ground; it was

*Prisoner, German prisoner (Germ. and It.)—*Tr.*

no longer of any use to the bomb which an American B-29 or a British bomber had dropped the night before when there had been an air raid that had almost wiped the little Austrian town, tucked away in the Alps, off the face of the earth. Although the fuse had been a dud, the bomb was a good one and still contained the thousand pounds of T.N.T. the prisoners counted on. No sooner had the fuse been removed than the Beetle extracted a brand-new fuse from under his jacket—it had been obtained the day before from a damaged bomb whose stabiliser had been knocked off; with his thin, nervous fingers he began screwing it into the bomb in place of the old one.

The young man, however, was in too much of a hurry and could not fit the screw to the threads; there was a clatter of metal and Ivan, to make sure nobody spotted them, straightened himself to get a look at what was going on at ground level.

Everything seemed quiet near them. Twisted girders were hanging over their heads, the smoky rays of the sun slanted down to the earth through a roof as full of holes as a colander; the air was muggy and dust-laden. Beyond a row of concrete pillars in the middle of the shop, there were muffled voices and occasional shouts as dozens of people were sorting out heaps of rubble in the sun-drenched dust. There were SS-men around, but they usually kept their distance and avoided all unnecessary curiosity when bombs were being defused.

"Now you've got it coming, you bastards," muttered the Beetle, unable to control his rage.

Golodai stood up over the bomb.

"Shut up!" he growled. "Count your chickens when they're hatched."

"It's all right, pals, it's all right," said Yanushka, wiping the sweat from his brow; he had been a collective-farm team-leader before the war and was now a one-eyed *Häftling*. He was the nearest thing to an optimist that a prisoner in a death camp could possibly be. Although his eye had been knocked out and his spleen injured by beating, he was always encouraging the others—when helping them to escape, or when he was brought back under escort, his clothes ripped to pieces by the dogs.

That was the way they expressed their attitude towards the plan they had made, all except Srebnikov, who was standing by the wall coughing all the time, and also Ivan. From the very beginning Srebnikov had shown little enthusiasm for the idea—even its success meant little to him for consumption was killing him quicker than the camp regime and the beatings. Ivan Tereshka was taciturn by nature and saw no sense in talking when everything was obvious without words.

Golodai rubbed his hands on his striped trousers and looked at

the others—of course, the whole idea had been his.

"Who's going to hit it?"

At once they all stopped talking and fixed downcast eyes on the long bomb with the scratches running along its green flanks. Yanushka, with grey stubble on his sunken cheeks, looked concentrated and unhappy; the determination disappeared from the Beetle's darting eyes; Srebnikov even stopped coughing and let his arms hang down his flat-chested body—his glance became intolerably sorrowful. Obviously this question was one that had bothered them from the very outset; none of them spoke, each of them was deciding the most important thing of all for himself.

Golodai's broad face, however, showed his impatience and his firm determination to see it through to the end.

"No volunteers!" was his gloomy conclusion. "Then we'll draw lots."

"Yes, that's best." The Beetle brightened up and moved closer to Golodai.

"All right, we'll draw. It'll be fair," agreed Yanushka.

Srebnikov coughed softly and, it seemed, with relief. Tereshka did not speak but drove the sharp end of his crowbar into the earth with a single swing. But Golodai, slapping his thighs, let out a string of rich oaths.

"What are we going to draw with? Not a match or a straw here."

He looked round impatiently and grabbed the heavy, long-handled sledgehammer that stood in the corner.

"We'll have to do it this way. Hand over hand."

He squatted down and grasped the handle close to the head. The others moved over to him and bent down, their heads together over the hammer. The Beetle grasped the handle above Golodai's hand, then Yanushka's knotted fingers curled round it, above came Srebnikov's hand and lastly Tereshka's big fist; after him Golodai again, the Beetle, and Yanushka. Finally, Srebnikov's sweating, trembling hand touched the remaining little piece of the handle.

Each of them involuntarily sighed with relief; they rose to their feet and, standing by the wall, for a good half minute tried not to look at each other. Golodai with determination held out the sledgehammer to the man who was to die with it.

"It was all done fairly. No deception," he said, still roughly, although there was a note of sympathy in his voice.

For some reason Srebnikov stopped coughing, staggered, grasped the handle of the sledgehammer, turned it round without speaking, tried to lift it and then let it drop. His eyes, filled with indescribable sadness, were fixed on his companions.

"I can't break it," he said softly, in the tones of a doomed man. "I've no strength left."

Again silence. Golodai's eyes flashed angrily at him.

"What's that?!"

"I can't smash it... My strength's ... all gone," Srebnikov explained dejectedly and coughed a terrible rasping cough.

Golodai looked at him and cursed angrily.

"You're all good at planning," the Beetle muttered venomously.

"Of course he can't smash it. He's too weak," Yanushka was ready to agree.

Something seemed to break inside Tereshka and although he realised that Srebnikov was not pretending, such an unexpected turn of events aroused his anger. For a minute he glared at the skeleton of a man; he was making up his own mind. He was not particularly anxious to die, naturally; he wanted to live as much as any of them and had made three attempts to escape (once he got almost as far as Zhitomir). Nevertheless there are moments in a man's life, it seems, when he has to decide to look death in the face.

He stepped up to Srebnikov.

"Give it to me."

Srebnikov's sorrowful eyes blinked in amazement, and he obediently released his hold of the hammer. Tereshka put the hammer down beside him and, in slightly embarrassed tones, told the others to get a move on.

"What are you hanging about for? Get hold of it. What are you waiting for?"

Gloomy Golodai, nervous Beetle and worried Yanushka looked at him in amazement; suddenly they came to life and took their places round the bomb.

"Up with it! Beetle, where's the rope? Push the poles under it. Where've the poles got to?" Tereshka gave his orders with unnatural elation. As he was looking for the poles that had been got ready beforehand, he happened to glance out of the pit and saw something that made him shudder. The others stood quite still; Tereshka, with a foreboding or evil, straightened his back.

In the dust cloud whirling in the slanting rays of the sun stood *Kommandoführer* Sandler; his glance fell on Ivan, their eyes met, and Sandler beckoned with his head.

"*Komm.*"

Tereshka swore softly to himself, stood the sledgehammer against the wall of the pit and quickly (in such cases there was no question of not hurrying) crawled up the freshly dug-up earth around the crater. The men behind him crouched down in silence, in concentration.

It was stuffy in the shop, although it was empty at that end (the Germans had removed the machines for fear of the bomb exploding); everywhere the dusty rays of the afternoon sun penetrated

the damaged roof and spread over the floor. At the other end of that huge hangar-like shop, where the damage was greatest, a party of women from Sector C were clearing away the rubble; there were dozens of them carrying tote-boxes and others pushing wheel-barrows loaded with rubble along boards laid on the ground.

Sandler stood in the gangway under a row of girders to one side of a large patch of sunlight on the floor; with his hands behind his back he waited. Tereshka quickly jumped down from the pile of earth, his clogs clattering over the floor, halted five paces from Sandler, right in the middle of the patch of light on the floor, and frowned. Sandler took one hand from behind his back and pulled at the wide peak of his cap.

"*Wie ist es mit der Bombe?*"*

"Soon. *Gleich,*" Ivan answered with restraint.

"*Schneller hinaustragen!*"**

Sandler looked suspiciously at the crater from which the heads of the men were peeping cautiously, and then inquiringly at Ivan. Ivan stood to attention like a soldier, ready for anything, his keen eyes on the clean-shaven, sun-tanned face of the German who was fully conscious of his authority and his dignity. At the same time, Ivan was keeping an eye on the German's right hand registering its every movement. Not far from them, in the other half of the shop, two women in striped clothing put their tote-box down on the ground and, suppressing their fear, watched curiously to see what would happen next. The German, however, after a glance at the broad-shouldered figure of the prisoner who outwardly expressed only a willingness to do anything, understood it in his own way. He stepped closer and held out a dusty boot to Ivan.

"Clean," he said, nodding at the boot.

Ivan naturally knew what was required of him (there was nothing new in this), but for a moment he was taken aback by the unexpectedness of it (he was prepared for something very different) and hesitated for some seconds. Sandler waited with a threatening scowl on his cruel, high-cheekboned face. Ivan could not risk any further hesitation and knelt down beside Sandler's feet. It was humiliating and insulting, and Ivan flinched and tried to control the anger he was in no position to express.

He bent over and began to wipe the boot with the sleeve of his jacket. The boots were new and had been properly cleaned that morning; soon the toe of the first boot began to reflect the sun. Then the shaft and back of the boot acquired a shine, a little dust remaining only on the welt, and besides, on the very toe of the boot there was a new scratch that could not be effaced. Meanwhile,

*How are you getting on with the bomb? (Germ.)–*Tr.*

**Get it out quicker! (Germ.)–*Tr.*

Sandler snapped his lighter, lit a cigarette and put his cigarette-case back into his pocket. The aroma of the cigarette tormented Ivan so. Then the German must have flicked the ash off his cigarette; sparks fell on Ivan's cropped head, some speck painfully burned his neck. Rage inundated Ivan with such force that he could hardly control himself–how badly he wanted to jump up and hit the German, knock him off his feet and jump on him. However, he continued cleaning the boot, fighting against himself and trying to have it done as quickly as possible. Sandler, however, was in no great hurry, and held out his boot until it gleamed from toe to knee, then he pulled it back in order to put forward the other.

Ivan straightened up slightly and in the split second of that respite glanced to where the women prisoners were standing looking at him. It was a casual glance, almost an absent one, then suddenly something made him look again. He tried to understand what it was. Oh, no, it would be better to be skinned alive than see again such devastating contempt in a woman's eyes. Somehow, he did not notice anything else, he did not even know whether it was a young face or an old one he had noticed, but the look she gave him, a look full of pain and reproach, scalded him like boiling water. In the meantime a dusty boot with a big white patch on the shaft had been moved towards him. Ivan did not move. The German muttered something impatiently and kicked him in the chest. Whatever it was inside Ivan that had enabled him to keep control of himself suddenly snapped, he let go of the sleeves he was holding between his fingers and clenched his fists so tightly that his fingernails bit into his palms. He leaped to his feet, fury lent him strength and gave his fists tremendous power; he hit the German savagely on the jaw. It all happened so quickly that he was even surprised to see Sandler stretched out on the cement floor. Sandler's cap fell off and rolled some distance from him.

Ivan was in no condition to realise exactly what had happened; he stood over the German, head drawn into his shoulders, feet wide apart and fists clenched, expecting Sandler to jump to his feet and attack him. He could hear excited exclamations in various languages some distance from him, but he did not know whether they were warning him or condemning him. Sandler did not jump up; he turned over slowly onto his side as though in pain, sat up, slowly reached out and picked up his cap and flicked it with his fingers several times to remove the dust. Only then did he raise his eyes to give the crazed and bewildered prisoner a heavy and threatening stare; then he tugged at the flap of his holster.

Ivan realized in a flash that everything was finished. The trigger clicked and the German sprang to his feet as quick as lightning. Ivan's momentary numbness left him. Determined not to die uselessly he lowered his head and dashed at his enemy.

But the blow never struck home—the earth trembled and heaved, a thunderous explosion threw Ivan into the air, stunned him and he blacked out. The German and everything else in the vicinity was hidden by a cloud of acrid brown dust.

A second later Ivan felt that he was lying on the floor and that all round him something was falling, something was raining down on him, something smoky that hissed and gave off an evil smell, something that burned his back. Nearby there was a belated crash as a brick fell down and broke into small pieces. Ivan looked round and saw the ill-fated boot with the scratched toe scraping helplessly on the floor and the figure of his enemy twitching spasmodically, trying to crawl away. Ivan picked up a heavy chunk of concrete from the floor and hurled it with all his might at the German's back. Sandler shuddered, groaned and jerked his hand. This reminded Ivan of the pistol; he crawled over the body on his knees, dragged the weapon out of Sandler's half-open hand and dashed into the whirling dust cloud, his heart almost leaping out of his chest.

5

Night, dark and miserable, overtook the fugitives in a narrow stony gully overgrown with twisted, stunted pines; further on, it gradually became narrower and rose in a gentle slope.

Ivan crawled over the mossy boulders, but he was growing less nimble; he halted now and again to wait for the girl who plodded along behind almost completely exhausted. He wanted to get out of that gloomy place at all costs. A thick mist was beginning to fill the gully; it probably would not be so dark higher up, but he could not make up his mind to climb because his strength was giving out. At the same time, he wanted to get as far away from the town as possible and make full use of the rain—a piece of luck for them because it had washed away their scent and the dogs had lost track of them. And so, exhausted as he was, he kept on and on up the mountains, for only there, in the Alps, was there any hope of freedom; below, in the valleys and on the roads, death awaited them.

Curse those mountains! Ivan was grateful to them for their inaccessibility to German security troops, dogs, motorcyclists and ambushes, but he was nevertheless beginning to hate them because they mercilessly sapped his strength and evidently they might easily finish him off altogether. This was nothing like his last flight from Silesia—at night it had been easy job going through fields and meadows, with the bright stars above showing him the way back to his own country. He was one of a small group of fugitives. Under the cover of night they had entered German villages and

farmhouses; they would find something to eat there, like vegetables from the gardens or milk from the churns left at the gates to be collected in the morning for transporting to the town. The long days had been spent tormentingly in idleness and they had taken turns to keep awake while the others slept hidden in the rye or in clumps of bushes. True, life had not been all beer and skittles there either. Ragged, unshaven, frightful scarecrows, they had been struggling for a whole month towards the frontier. He did not know what had happened to the others, but his luck had been right out; he had got away from the Germans only to fall into the hands of scoundrels who had looked like good ordinary people. When they took him to town under escort he at first refused to believe they were not pulling his leg—they were just ordinary village lads, they swore good-naturedly in a perfectly comprehensible language, they were dressed in ordinary peasant jackets and shirts and carried no arms but shotguns. Only one of them was wearing a white armband and had a German carbine hanging from his shoulder.

Here, however, there were mountains, the Austrian Alps, unknown and mysterious, a veritable terra incognita that nevertheless held a tiny, stubborn hope—freedom.

Ivan was worn out and began looking round for a place to spend the night; he heard a dull thud behind him, and stones came rattling over the cliff. He looked back and saw his companion lying on the slope, apparently not even trying to get up. He stopped, straightened his back, took a deep breath and waited. Twilight was falling. Higher up, rain as fine as dust was drizzling almost soundlessly, dull grey masses of stones lay all round, the pines stood out black and dishevelled against a sky that, weighed down by the weather and the darkness, hung low over the earth. Ivan's wet clothing, warmed by his long march, was steaming slightly, and he had only to stand still for a moment for shivers to run up and down his spine. He could see the silhouette of his companion in the distance, she now and then moved her head slightly, but her white arms, bare to the elbow were motionless. She did not get up. He went back down the slope, pushed the pistol into his jacket, bent down and carefully lifted her light body. She stirred as his hands touched her, and she sat up without raising her head; they would have to spend the night there, he thought regretfully, as he stood over her.

He took a good look round—on one side cliffs and piled-up boulders led steeply upwards, and on the other the slope ran down and disappeared into a dark pine thicket out of which a dense, cold, wet mist came creeping towards them. He could not see how far away it was, but somewhere in that grey, damp silence, he could hear a stream gurgling monotonously.

Ivan touched the girl's shoulder to indicate that she should stay where she was so that he could do some exploring while it was still light enough to see—in one place there was an overhang in the rocky cliff—not much of a shelter, of course, but it would, at least, protect them from the rain which was not likely to stop soon, and they could not expect to find anything better.

He turned back, stepping carefully on the sharp stones.

It was amazing how the girl had lost all her recent vivacity, the boldness she had displayed when the motorcyclists had been there. She now looked like a wet and tired bird that some misfortune had thrown into the gully. She was breathing heavily and did not respond to his touch; she did not get up but curled herself up into a tiny, trembling ball.

"Come on, let's have a rest," he said. "Rest—understand? Well, *schlafen*—how else can I tell you?"

For a moment she stopped shivering but continued to sit there with a drooping head. He stood still for a second and then picked her up in his arms to carry her into the shelter. She suddenly tore herself from his arms, screamed something in Italian, and began to kick at him so furiously that he let her go. He waited for a moment, embarrassed at her reaction, then thought angrily, "To hell with her, let her sit there in the rain, the idiot!" He went under the overhang and only then realised how tired he was; he closed his eyes as he pulled the collar of his jacket up round his neck and dropped off to sleep.

As usual, the world immediately ceased to exist for him, giving way to tangled nightmares which seemed like a continuation of the tormenting waking hours. Every night for more than a year it had always been the same dream, every night he had been reliving the torments of just one day of the war.

It all began with an atmosphere of trouble, real and distressing, trouble of the sort that comes in the wake of the rout. And although with time the experience had lost some of its acuteness and other worries, great and small, had overshadowed it, in the dream it was regular torture.

As usual, at first he would see the delapidated wall of a Ukrainian cottage on the corner of which someone had written the words "Alexeyev's Farm" and had drawn an arrow in charcoal. It had been done about a month before, when the army, bypassing Kharkov, was advancing on Zmiyev. By the time of the nightmare the troops were moving in the opposite direction. During the night they had sunk the tractors in the river—there was no more fuel for them—removed the breech-blocks from the guns, dismantled them and scattered them in the fields and burned H.Q. documents in the orchards. At dawn, after a short officers' meeting, there appeared in the farmyard where they had spent the

night, a colonel in command of the surrounded party. He ordered their company to cover the withdrawal, and three soldiers and a young lieutenant were digging a slit trench next to the end house.

Ivan remembered that clearly, but at the moment, in his troubled dreams, the colonel was for some reason running about the farmyard with a mapcase in his hands and cursing Golodai, the sailor from the Black Sea who had taken over command of a company of submachine gunners. He could not understand why the escaped prisoner Srebnikov was in the trench with him, Sergeant Ivan Tereshka, instead of Abdurrakhmanov, the Uzbek gunner who had served in their battery before it was destroyed and who understood scarcely a word of Russian. Instead of getting his machine gun ready for action, skinny, hungry Srebnikov was busy scraping the painted circles off his tunic with a German bayonet and muttering under his breath, "Not a step back! Not a step back!" At the same time his dream brought him not a distorted, but a quite real, vivid picture of that morning long ago—a clear spring sky, a shadow from a house slanted across the road, the trembling nettles under the fence and a pot stuck on a pole shaking in unison with the nettles.

Ivan knows that tanks are coming down the road towards the village. They will appear round the corner of the end house in a minute but Ivan cannot fit the fuse into his hand grenade. He pushes it hard, as hard as he can with his fingers, but the little brass cylinder seems to have grown thicker and he cannot get it into the hole. He loses his temper and, forgetting caution in his hurry, hits it with his hand; when he realizes what he is doing he looks up and sees that everybody has retreated and that he is alone in the trench. Then he understands that he, too, has to leave, that he has not heard the order to retreat. Ivan throws himself against the parapet and tries to get out of the trench; the earth gives way under him and his body suddenly becomes strangely heavy, it does not obey him and he slips back into the trench.

The tanks are very close.

A huge flock of sparrows, disturbed by their rumbling, sweeps up and covers half the sky; they swirl round in one direction and then all turn in the other at the very moment the first tank appears from behind the house tearing up the dirt road as it advances.

Ivan realises that he won't get away in time, swings his grenade impotently and throws it onto the road. For some reason it does not explode, just jumps about and hisses, and the tank drives round it. Then the men in the tank notice the slit trench under the wall, the tank turns and Ivan is filled with indescribable horror—it is a Soviet T-34.

For a second Ivan is in such a state of fear that he loses his self-control. What has he done! He turns back and almost runs into

a broad German bayonet—the German gives a short thrust and the bayonet gently, silently enters his chest as though it were somebody else's. Ivan knows this is the end, that he is dead and he chokes with despair although somehow there is no pain.

He usually wakes up in a cold sweat at this moment, but on the present occasion his mind is functioning apart from his body, as if from the outside, encouraging him, telling him that not all is over yet, that he will be taken prisoner, that there will be attempts to escape, so that he cannot die even if he has a bayonet in his chest.

The dreams follow one another, becoming intermingled, and he suddenly finds himself in his native village of Tereshki, in the ancient land of the Krivichi tribe, and everything is taking place before the war, even before he was called up for service in the army. Ivan is running along a collective farm road, beaten hard by the hoofs of the sheep, to the granary where he knows the sailor Golodai and several other prisoners have been brought with their hands tied behind them. Ivan's heart is bursting with resentment and strain, he is afraid he will be too late to drive it home to the people that they should not vent their spite on prisoners, whose capture is not their fault but their misfortune; they did not surrender but were captured—or had been betrayed, there had been such cases, too.

But he does not reach the granary. His bare feet get stuck in the mud, he is scarcely able to drag them out, his arms go numb, then his whole body, and he seems to be running through water, slowly and with difficulty. Choosing his road he turned towards a fence and suddenly sees there a pair of long bare legs; he raises his head and sees a girl sitting on the top rail, a girl he does not know, her thick black eyebrows raised in greeting. Her white frock sparkles in the sun and she is smiling radiantly with eyes like damsons.

"*Ciao,* Ivan!" she says.

He stops and suddenly forgets about the prisoners, about everything else in the world, and is glad, happy, embarrassed to meet her, he seems suddenly to have known her for a long time—she is the girl of his dreams who has lived subconsciously in his mind all his life. He is almost choking with joy as he walks towards the hedge, towards the girl, but suddenly stops and casts a glance at himself; he has just come running from the fields, from his tractor, he is wearing old trousers with patches on the knees and a shirt that is faded on the shoulders, and his hands are smeared with black oil. He stops and his face darkens with embarrassment; she, too, chases the bright smile from her unusually radiant face, her brilliant white dress slowly loses its brilliance and the girl vanishes like a phantom.

Then he rushes to the fence, grabs hold of the rails and the stakes, and at this moment he sees his mother standing there. She is in the potato field on the other side of the fence dressed in her dark peasant clothes. Her voice is filled with sorrow.

"She's a fascist, sonny. She betrayed your boys to the Germans..."

"Where is she? Where's she gone?" he wants to shout, but he cannot because there is a rope round his neck, the black silk cord with which prisoners in camp are hanged to the roll of drums. The rope is knotted round his neck, it is pulled tight, and the other end drags along the ground–the leash of the police dog he did not finish off in the gully. The dog is pulling hard at the leash, Ivan falls, he wants to shout but no sound comes from his throat; some inner impulse wakes him up.

6

"Ha, ha, ha." The clear laugh of a young girl resounded over him.

He raised his head, felt his neck and opened his eyes wide; the first thing he saw was the bright, unfathomable blue sky above and, beside him, a girl displaying her white teeth in happy laughter.

"No more *schlafen. Marsch, marsch...*"

His whole body shivered from cold as though from an electric current. He had not yet got rid of the dreams that tormented him, and for a while sat silent, unable to switch over to the world of reality with all its cares; he glanced at the girl but did not share her merry mood. She was sitting beside him, leaning on one hand, and chewing a blade of grass, apparently the one she had tickled him with. The apathy and exhaustion of the day before seemed to have gone without leaving a trace.

"*Marsch,* you say? We'll see."

"We'll see, we'll see," she agreed with a cheeky gleam in her eyes as she studied his face.

His shoulders trembled as he shivered again from cold, then he sprang up and began wildly jerking his arms up and down, jumping with his legs astride, doing a series of knee-bends, the soldier's tried and tested way of warming up. At first she raised her beautifully-shaped eyebrows in surprise, then she gave him a short but very loud laugh, so loud that he hissed "Shush!"–afraid that she would be heard.

She suddenly remembered where she was, and covered her mouth with her hand but there was still that irrepressible cheeky look in her eyes. Ivan looked at her sternly, reproachfully, and then stood and listened; he felt the warmth gradually returning to

his body, but she again laughed her carefree, teasing laugh.

"That ... *ginnastica?*"

"Gymnastics. What if it is, would you rather freeze?"

He was worried and had no time for jokes. She seemed to realise this and became more serious; she shivered with cold, her thin, narrow shoulders shaking under a jacket that was still wet from the day before, she looked up at him wonderingly.

As was customary with an experienced soldier, he first looked round in all directions, realizing that they had badly overslept; it was long past sunrise and although the sun had not yet appeared from over the mountain tops, the cloudless sky seemed to resound with the clear blue of morning. The opposite side of the ravine, lit up by the sun, was shining with all the colours of the rainbow–the grey cliff, the pines, the wide, steep gullies and the boulders carved into fantastic shapes by wind and water. Their own side of the ravine was still a grey, smoky mass dozing patiently in the lap of the night gloom.

"Mountains good!" She could see that he was looking intently at their surrounds. "How you call it? *Estetica!*"

Her clogs clattered as she got up from the stone on which she had been sitting and ran out from under the rock to admire the wealth of sunshine across the ravine. Ivan, however, had no time for the beauties of nature; he felt the pangs of hunger as he had done every morning in the prison camp, every particle of his body knew that tormenting feeling of emptiness, that habitual wave of hunger, familiar to the very finest detail. There was nothing to eat–where were they to obtain food in those accursed mountains was something he did not know, but at the same time he was fully conscious of their inability to go far without eating. After a short pause, he swallowed his saliva and, absolutely indifferent to the things the girl found interesting, asked her where she was going.

She did not understand him and raised her brows enquiringly.

"*Marsch, marsch*–where?" He was beginning to show signs of annoyance and repeated his question, waving his arms. "That way, or that? Where were you running to?"

"Oh, *Ostfront!* Running to Russian front!"

He looked at her in amazement.

"*Sí, sí,*" she confirmed her words, seeing his disbelief. "Signorina good, shoot German, bang-bang!"

A fine mess he was in! From early morning her naïve chatter began to rouse his anger. Ivan frowned as he looked at the girl's mobile and, to him, far too pretty face–was she serious about shooting Germans? She seemed to be quite serious about her intention to get to the Russian front; she was now waiting to hear what he had to say as she stared at him with her bottomless eyes.

"What bang-bang?! Idiocy..." Ivan pulled the skirts of his jacket tightly around his body.

"*Was?* What you mean, idiocy? *Russo* teach signorina *Russky sprechen,* eh?"

"We'll see."

"See is good. Agree, eh?" she asked, continuing to question him jokingly. He did not answer; he shivered as he felt the cold damp of the jacket on his back, looked at the clumsily drawn circles, the targets, on his breast, and thought how necessary it would be to get clothes as well as food since they would not be able to get far in their striped prison garb. With hooked fingers he ripped the strip of cloth with the number off his jacket and she tried to follow his example. The nails of her thin fingers, however, were too tender and the thread was too strong to give way easily. She walked up to him, stuck out her lower lip like a baby and turned her shoulder to him.

"There!"

"Here, and not there!" he said and turned slowly towards her. The tiny pointed swellings under her damp jacket made him frown and press his lips together; she noticed it and, grabbing the loose folds of the coat over her breast, pulled the coat away from her body. After a little hesitation Ivan caught hold of the corner of the number and ripped it off. He rolled the rags up into a ball and hid them under a rock so that no trace of them would be left.

"*Spasibo.* Thanks."

"Where did you learn Russian words?"

"In Italia. Roma. In camp *Russ* signorina Marusya teach me. Good Russian *sprechen, ja?*"

"Not bad," he agreed, indifferently.

"Understand very good all right," she said boastfully, and Ivan smiled inwardly, the girl was so naïve. But he was thinking of something else.

"Where's Trieste, do you know?"

"Oh, Trieste, Italia," she answered immediately.

"I know it's in Italy, but where, in which direction?"

She looked first in one direction and then in another and then raised her hand and pointed confidently to where the sun they still could not see was rising over the mountains.

"Road Trieste that way."

"Road!" Ivan thought gloomily. What a road—through the whole mass of the Alps with their densely populated towns and busy motor roads; Trieste where there were guerrillas, the place he had heard so much about in prison camps, was not very near. But there was little choice and now that they had succeeded in getting out of one hell, it would be foolish to hang from a black cord while drummers played a roll.

So they had to go on. To walk, climb, run! He must not lose heart, he must muster his strength, make use of all his experience to cross the main mountain range and find partisans, guerrillas, Yugoslavs or Italians, it did not matter which as long as he could stand once again in the ranks of the fighters with arms in hand. In this alone lay the real meaning of life for him now; this was his vocation and this would be his reward for all the suffering and humiliation he had gone through during a year as a prisoner of war.

It was cold in that gloomy ravine; their bodies had grown cold during the night and were trembling and they wanted to get to the sun, to warmth, as quickly as possible. They found a suitable place on the slope and crawled upwards between the boulders. Today, for the first time since they had met, she went in front and he, lagging slightly behind, scrambled after her; this was like the first show of confidence between them.

The stony slope was rather steep at this point and her clogs kept slipping and falling from her feet. In the end the girl took them off and carried them in one hand; with the other she pulled herself up by the wire-hard, prickly stems of some plant, jumping from stone to stone with the agility of a lizard.

"*Russo,*" she said, stopping for a moment, "you officer?"

"I'm no officer. I'm a P.O.W."

"P.O.W. Understand. What you do before war?"

Ivan did not answer immediately. He did not like the idea of her interrogating him like the counterintelligence department of the army, and grunted hesitantly:

"*Kolkhoznik!*"

"What is *kolkhoznik*?"

"You don't understand but you keep asking questions," he said roughly. "It's something like a *Bauer,* farmer, *verstehen*?"

"Ah, I know–*Landwirtschaft,* farming."

"That's it, *kolkhoz.*"

"I like *kolkhoz,*" she said, suddenly brightening up. "*Kolkhoz* good. *Lavorare,* work all together. Rest all together. Everything all together. Good when all together. *Russo kolkhoz* good *economia.* I understand right?" she asked and looked round at him.

Before he could answer stones, earth and rubbish moved by her feet came tumbling down on him and he barely managed to get out of the way. She laughed cheekily at him from above and leaned sideways against the slope.

"Keep quiet, can't you!" Ivan shouted angrily.

She again remembered where she was, covered her mouth with her hand and looked round.

"Pardon."

"Pardon, pardon! Keep quiet. What are you getting so excited about?"

Her carelessness aroused his ire. Perhaps he had shouted too brusquely at her, she gave him a hurt look and pressed her lips tightly.

"My name Giulia. Signorina Giulia," she said.

He looked at her sternly, thinking, "So what if you are a signorina!" It meant absolutely nothing whatever to him and he had no intention of giving her any special treatment. She seemed to have taken offence, stopped talking and hurried up the slope. Ivan lagged slightly behind. He bent low over the ground taking long strides over the rough stones, glancing occasionally at her agile striped figure and wondering who she could be. Some dissolute European *Hure** as the Germans called them, a homeless girl in the noisy Italian cities, a thoughtless moth who had burnt her wings in the fierce fires of war? That seemed the most likely, judging by her mischievous and, apparently, adventure-loving character. It was true that the number on her jacket had been red which showed that she was a political prisoner, and she had said something about how she hated the Germans, but Ivan did not very well believe that her hatred of the fascists had any serious grounds. It was possible that one of them had insulted her, and then she had been through the bitter experience of the camp, but such as she would hardly be likely to remember insults for long. Anyway, he scarcely knew her but had already several times witnessed her thoughtlessness in many of the little things on which the fate of their escape depended. He realised that in this situation he would have to be particularly vigilant and rely mainly on himself.

7

When at last they reached the brow of the cliff and paused for breath they saw spread out before them a huge gently-sloping hillside covered with twisted mountain pines. After the damp and gloomy ravine the open mountain-side seemed unusually extensive; far below them lay a wide valley, and beyond it, in the pale, blue-grey haze, towered the next range of mountains.

"*Rauchen,*" she panted, using the word she had heard Germans use when they stopped work for a smoke; they, however, had nothing to smoke. "Rest little while."

Without answering Ivan sat down on the edge of a block of stone that jutted up out of the earth, while she took a swift glance uphill at the tangled mass of boulders and rocks and then downhill at the forested slope with frequent patches of brown earth between the trees. He looked up at her and felt that her glance had rested

*Whore (Germ.)—*Tr.*

on something that made her freeze into immobility, holding up one foot and even forgetting to put the clog on it. He jumped up—far down below there was a path running through the trees. Giulia gripped his sleeve without turning round.

"*Russo, Mensch!* Man!"

He could already see him himself, hurrying up the path.

They sat down. Giulia seemed to have forgotten that she was offended and looked straight at him with her deep, dark eyes; he turned his scowling face away from her and took the pistol out from under his jacket. The girl understood what he was going to do when he touched her on the shoulder as if telling her to stay there while he, crouching down, disappeared into the far from dense pine grove, hurrying down the slope, pushing the lower branches aside in the hope of reaching the path.

He was trying to keep to where the trees were thicker and it was taking him a long way from the ravine; he was beginning to think that he should not have left the girl alone.

There was a strong smell of pine needles in the air and those that so richly carpeted the stony ground were merciless to his already badly lacerated feet. Soon the rays of the morning sun slipped over the mountains and began to warm the air. Recalling the chase of the day before, he released the catch on the plastic handle of the pistol and pulled out the magazine—there were five rounds in the magazine and one in the breech. This made him more hopeful; he thought they might be able to get hold of some clothing, shoes and, perhaps, food. He was still desperately hungry. At the very thought of food his mouth filled with saliva that he could scarcely manage to swallow.

The path appeared suddenly among the pines about ten paces from him; he stopped there, looked up and down, but saw no one. He stood and listened—a tiny, dock-tailed bird flew up from a fantastically twisted pine quite close to him and an old cone fell to the ground. Then silence. He looked round for some sort of cover and a little farther on dropped on to some sparse, prickly grass behind a moss-covered rock.

He lay face-down on the ground glancing frequently at where the path showed between the trees, and wondering what he was going to do with the man. He was certain that the man coming up the path was no soldier and that he would hand over his clothes without offering any resistance (after all Ivan had a pistol), but what then? His conscience revolted against the idea of killing an unarmed man, while to let him go free would be sheer suicide. No matter how hard he strained his tired brain that he was not complete master of, he could not think of a way out, he felt that this indetermination boded no good. One thing was absolutely certain—they would never be able to cross the main range in their present state.

The man proved to be closer than Ivan had imagined. He appeared suddenly on the path below, bent double under a load and trotting rather than walking; he was out of breath and he kept looking back and searching the trees with his eyes. Could he have seen them? Ivan lay tense behind his rock, curling up so as to hide his striped clothing and then with sudden fury he cursed as the full realization came to him that what he was about to do was foul and despicable.

But it had to be done.

He let the man come close and kept out of sight by pulling up his legs and moving round the rock. An ant was wriggling up his sleeve and it made his shoulder burn as if it had been stung by nettles. The Austrian was carrying a heavy canvas bag on his back. He came hurrying along in his rough, thicksoled boots and had just come up to the rock when Ivan reached the path in three short leaps. Hearing a noise, the man looked behind him; he was an awkwardly-built, fat, elderly man in a leather jacket, a Tyrolean hat with beaver-tail tassels and well worn trousers baggy at the knees. His eyelids fluttered from the unexpectedness of it all, he said something in rapid German, waved his arms and moved towards Ivan. The Russian raised the pistol.

"*Herr Häftling! Herr Häftling!*" burbled the Austrian. "*Wozu die pistole?* S.S."*

Ivan was immediately on the alert; reluctant as he was to believe it, he realized that they were again in trouble. That damned ant was running about between his shoulder blades but Ivan did not make a move to shake it off—he stared at the Austrian with severe merciless eyes.

"S.S. *Dort* S.S. Patrol!" the man spoke in worried tones. He was excited, the sweat was running in streams down his elderly, flabby face, and his chest was wheezing and rattling. Ivan looked round and bit his lip.

"Where S.S.?"

"There, there. I want to help you!"

The man waved one hand, holding on to the strap of his bag with the other.

"You're not lying?"

"No, no, I'm an honest man," he said heatedly. And then, changing his tone, he said in broken Russian, "I was prisoner in Siberia."

A certain warmth flashed up in his worried, lacklustre eyes, as though he had recalled something pleasant, and Ivan could see that he was not pretending. There was need to hurry because they

*Mr. Prisoner! Mr. Prisoner! You don't need the pistol. (Germ.)—*Tr.*

might be discovered at any moment and their last hope of obtaining even a crust of bread would disappear together with that man.

"Who you? Why you here?" Ivan asked sternly and roughly dragged the Austrian off the path by the sleeve of his jacket.

"I'm the forester, my house is over there."

Ivan looked up in the direction the man indicated but could not see any house; what he did see was Giulia coming out from among the trees; she had apparently heard them talking and was calling out to him.

"*Russo! Russo!* Run..."

Ivan took no notice of her warning cry but again caught the Austrian by the shoulder and pulled the bag off his back.

"*Essen?* Food?"

"*Ja, ja. Brot,*"* said the Austrian.

He seemed to understand what was wanted of him, dropped to his knees and with trembling fingers unzipped his rucksack. Ivan grabbed a small loaf of stale bread out of the bag. The Austrian did not object, he had suddenly lost all his former vitality; for a moment Ivan felt like reproaching himself, but immediately suppressed that feeling and, stepping back under the pine, looked upwards at the grey snow-topped mountains and turned to the Austrian. The man was fastening his rucksack; he fumbled with the zipper, but his fingers wouldn't obey. Ivan threw the loaf to Giulia and stepped back to the man.

"Take it off!"

Ivan had forgotten the German word for jacket and the Austrian did not understand him, so he tugged expressively at the man's sleeve. The Austrian was in no hurry to hand over his clothing and there was confusion on his red, elderly, sclerotic face.

"*Schneller!*" shouted Ivan and pulled all the harder.

"*Schneller, schneller, Russo!* Quick!" Giulia called softly but insistently from among the trees. In a sort of hopeless resignation the Austrian, his whole body suddenly turning to a flabby mass, took off the jacket. Ivan almost tore it out of his hands and looked into the man's eyes for the last time. He realised that it was base ingratitude, but there was no other way.

He ran to the place among the trees where he had seen Giulia's striped jacket and, looking back as he went, saw that the Austrian, left only in dark blue braces over a light shirt, was still standing in the same place, following them with his eyes, his hands hanging by his sides. Ivan would never know what that glance meant.

*Bread (Germ.)—*Tr.*

8

Again they climbed upwards as fast as they could. Within a quarter of an hour their faces were wet with perspiration and their steps had become shorter—their strength was beginning to ebb. The pine woods came to an end and they continued their way up a gentle grassy slope; this was apparently the limit of the forest and higher up there were bare, moss-covered boulders and piled-up rocks; and above them, high up against the sky, rose the snow-besprinkled backbone of the mountain spur, grey like the wing of a partridge. The slope grew steeper and ended against a vertical wall of rock which, as they drew nearer to it, Ivan realized they would never be able to climb. He turned and ran along that giant barrier, looking for somewhere to hide. He was tormented by doubt all the time—anything was to be expected of the Austrian. "As long as there are no dogs," thought Ivan, "as long as there are no dogs." He knew with absolute finality that if the Germans set dogs after them they would not get away.

As he ran along the slope he kept glancing down; the whole of that wooded hill was spread out before him—the broad ravine where they had spent the night, the pine woods and, what must be the forester's house, a building with a high brick pediment and a long wooden gallery along the walls. He expected the Germans to appear there at any moment, but for some reason they were late in coming and everything was quiet near the house and there was no one about. Not even the forester himself was to be seen, probably he had not yet come up the hill. In these few tense moments Ivan savagely cursed those who had made it necessary for him to go to such lengths. What was he—a bandit or a gangster? Would he have had to hold up that peaceful, fat, old man, threaten him with a pistol and even rob him if it had not been for the war, for his being a prisoner, for the inhuman cruelty, the insults and humiliation he had suffered, had it not been for the course he was determined to take for the sake of his own life, Giulia's and that Austrian's too.

Making their way round the huge boulders that lay in that grassy field they ran down a hollow and came to a crevice in the rocky wall, a narrow crack that penetrated deep into the stony massif. Ivan was greatly pleased with this. He thought there might be a stream there in which they could hide their trail, and he felt, too, that they ought to hide because the Germans might appear at any moment. Ivan mustered the last remnants of his strength and ran across the grass with Giulia, completely worn out but still plodding along, running after him.

They scratched their legs hurrying through the rhododendron thicket and soon reached the crevice but, unfortunately, there was

no stream. It was a wild, silent place steeped in humid, stifling gloom, with thorn bushes hanging from its almost vertical walls and coarse grass growing between the stones. Bones lay on the floor of the crevice and some night bird, startled by the appearance of people, made off down the crevice with a scream. The place seemed terribly forbidding but Ivan had become a little calmer now that they had managed to reach cover. He slowed down his pace, climbed on to a moss-covered slab of rock and waited for Giulia. Holding out her arms to keep her balance, she came running towards him, her black hair tangled in the wind, her face burning from exertion and fatigue; when she looked at Ivan, there was fear and anxiety in her eyes instead of the usual vivacity.

"*Santa Madonna!* We get away, eh?" asked Giulia.

"Move quicker," he snapped at her.

"What you mean, quicker?"

Ivan did not answer her. Breathing heavily, Giulia ran up to him and they made their way further over the stones.

"Very good *Vater! Communista Vater!*" she said gleefully.

"Who's a Communist? Just an ordinary man, that's all," Ivan answered in annoyance.

"*Sí, sí,* man. Good man," the girl agreed, making her way forward.

He was listening intently to sounds coming from below but at the same time could not take his eyes off the loaf of bread she held under her arm. Giulia could feel his eyes on her.

"*Essen?* Bread, eh?" she asked, turning round.

She quickly broke off a crust and handed it to him. Ivan took it without hesitation, bit off a couple of pieces and swallowed them. They had to hurry, the Germans might appear behind them at any moment, but he could not help thinking of the bread and he became morose and slow. Giulia understood this, stopped, squatted on her heels and with her quick little fingers tore a big piece of bread off the edge of the loaf and pushed it into Ivan's broad, rough hand. She carefully gathered into her hand the crumbs that had fallen on her jacket and threw them into her mouth.

Ivan took the bread carefully in his hands, turned it about as though examining it, gave the loaf in her hands a sideways look, and broke the piece she had given him carefully into two. He seemed to weigh them in his hands and then held out one half to her. She did not refuse, but laughed and took it with a swift movement.

"*Danke.* No—thanks, *spasibo.*"

He was chewing away hungrily and did not answer her.

They crawled on. The girl also began to eat in silence, but there was very little bread and the tiny pieces only whetted their appe-

tites so that Giulia soon turned sharply round to her companion.

"*Russo!* Let's *mangiare* all, eat all bread!"

She screwed up her eyes merrily and that mischievous spark again appeared in them; her fingers dug into the partly eaten loaf ready to break it and Ivan took fright, believing that she really would whittle away their modest supply. He grabbed her hand.

"Give it here!"

Giulia raised her eyebrows in amazement and Ivan snatched the bread away from her and quickly wrapped it up in the leather jacket. The girl was at first indignant, then she suddenly burst out laughing. He looked at her in bewilderment.

"What are you laughing at?"

"*Russo* right! Giulia no trust bread. Trust Giulia word, trust Giulia love, bread no trust. *Giusto*—right, *Russo!*"

Laughing, she came up behind Ivan and touched his thin shoulder lightly with her hand. This unexpected tenderness embarrassed Ivan and he shrugged his shoulders to hide his feeling of awkwardness.

"All right," he grunted, intending to continue on his way, when a distant rifle shot reverberated through the mountains. They stood stock still and looked at each other—from below, from somewhere near the forester's house there came shouts immediately followed by bursts of submachine-gun fire that roared and rattled over the crevice as it was echoed back and forth. Ivan crouched and listened intently, waiting for the familiar, hated baying of dogs. There was no barking. No bullets reached the crevice, the firing was well away to the side. Ivan was a bit surprised at this. He stood listening for about half a minute, then threw the jacket down on the stones; grasping the occasional bushes and finding toeholds in the irregularities of the rock, he scrambled to the top to get a glimpse of the world outside.

The bursts of fire came rattling and crashing one after another, and through the noise of the fusillade he heard the distant sound of motorcycles. Giulia threw back her head and followed Ivan's movements intently; he was almost half-way up the steep cliff. He glanced round at the entrance to the crevice, crept a little higher and stood there motionless, his head drawn well in, watching the distant house and the Germans. Giulia whipped up the jacket, kicked off her clogs and shouted something to him; he seemed glued to the rock and unable to take his eyes off the spectacle below, a little bit of which he could see from his vantage point.

Three motorcycles were rushing to and fro among the sparse fir-trees in front of the forester's house, their machine guns firing frantically at something up above them. There were some more motorcycles farther away; by the sound of it they were trying to climb higher up the hill, but an outjutting rock prevented his see-

ing them. The only certain thing was that they were firing not in the direction of their rock crevice, and the rate of their fire told him that they were definitely aiming at something.

The behaviour of the Germans gave Ivan a vague idea of what was going on; he moved a little to one side and, hiding well behind the outjutting rock, climbed higher. Suddenly he got a full view of everything going on down below.

Giulia shouted something to him but he did not hear her—glued to the rock, he saw a figure in striped clothing running up the slope towards a cliff, throwing out his long legs as he ran. Bullets kicked up spurts of dust all round him. The prisoner fell, jumped to his feet and ran, only to fall again a few seconds later. Three Germans had left their motorcycles and were running after him, quite a way behind though, and the others were firing at him over their heads. It was heavy, volley fire, but still the prisoner ran on. Occasionally he looked back, seemed to be shouting something, and then fell again; each time he fell Ivan thought he would never rise again. But no, as soon as the firing slackened he leaped up and ran.

"*Russo! Russo!* What you look at, *Russo?*" shouted Giulia, stamping her foot impatiently.

Ivan was watching the fugitive, afraid of moving on the rock-face and believing that the man's fate was sealed. Soon he really did fall down right at the foot of the cliff and the firing immediately stopped.

Something seemed to give way inside Ivan, he slid quickly down the rock breathing a silent thanksgiving to fate for giving them cover in that crack.

"Finished."

"Finished?" Giulia stared at him wide-eyed, but did not understand.

"Your companion."

"*Krank Häftling?*"

"Yes."

"Oi, oi!"

He took the jacket from the flabbergasted Giulia, she picked up her clogs quickly and they began to make their way over the stones to the top.

9

And so, after all, they had failed to escape unobserved, they had given themselves away and left a witness behind. Ivan was again assailed by doubts—would the Austrian betray them?

Experience of former attempts to escape told him that such circumstances usually proved fatal. Neither in the open fields, nor in

the mountains, nor even on the roads were they as vulnerable as when they entered a village, a farmstead or a country estate and met people. It was there that danger awaited the cautious and even the overcautious. Incredibly difficult journeys to freedom often ended abruptly in such inhabited places and still more tormenting journeys began—journeys to the West, back to prison. However, it was impossible to avoid people altogether; they needed food and clothing and they had to ask their way. So they had to take risks, relying on sheer chance, on luck and on human feelings. They were often lucky, but by no means always.

A year before Ivan had also hoped that everything would continue to go as well as the first thirty-two days. Their group of four had managed to dodge the ambushes, they had swum across rivers, bypassed villages and avoided running into the police; twice they had been chased and it was on one of these occasions that they had lost the fourth, the tankman Valeri from Leningrad. The other three had got as far as their native land, as far as Volhynia; there were Ukrainian villages around and in the fields peasants were driving horses and oxen, ploughing their strips of land. It was becoming warm, so they could spend the nights in the forest and not poke their noses into villages when there was no need. If it were not for the food, they could have kept out of the villages altogether and everything would have been all right.

On that particular morning it was Ivan's turn; he left his companions at the edge of the forest and entered a village.

He was a little bit late to leave the forest through which they had passed the previous night along a winding road. Dawn was already breaking, but Ivan did not want to go deeper into the forest on an empty stomach. From the forest verge he studied the nearest hamlet and saw nothing suspicious there. There did not seem to be any main road in the vicinity, and so he made his way across some swampy ground to the first cottage, keeping closer to the dark bushes. Under the skirts of his coat he carried a German submachine gun with twelve rounds in the magazine—this he had acquired on the road somewhere near Krakow; he was wearing army boots and had a peasant's homespun coat thrown over his shoulders. Outwardly he resembled an ordinary villager, like any other in those parts. He reached the kitchen gardens unchallenged and then, following the path that led between the wattle fences from the threshing floor, turned towards the nearest house. Unfortunately it was on the other side of the lane; he looked up and down the road but there was nobody in sight, only a door creaked somewhere in the yard and a cow lowed—probably the housewife had gone out to milk it. Before he could get across the road, someone came out of the next yard. Ivan did not even glance at him but felt that the man had seen him; keeping his head bent Ivan dodged

round the corner of the house. There he turned to look back, the man was not in sight, but outside the house opposite he saw a huge canvas-covered lorry. That was a piece of bad luck, especially as shouts of alarm were already coming from the yard and there was nowhere to hide (beyond the cottage lay a freshly harrowed field); he dived into the nearest door. There stood an unshaven, middle-aged peasant. He seemed to have understood everything, turned somewhat pale, apparently because of the shouts, glanced at Ivan, whose coat bulged where the submachine gun was and stepped back to let him into the cottage. Ivan found himself in a neat, clean, outer room with freshly-cut rushes spread on the floor; he rushed hither and thither and, finding no suitable hiding place, dashed into the inner room where there was a big brick stove. He saw the black ashpit under the stove, dropped on to his knees and looked out of the window beside which stood a wooden bed with three pairs of children's feet sticking out from under a striped homespun blanket. He had a premonition that he had got into the wrong place.

It was too late to do anything, heavy boots were tramping across the yard and he crawled into the sooty ashpit, scraping his hips on the side, and crouched down out of sight as some people entered the outer room. He held his breath as he heard strange voices—Germans, two or more. The peasant did not understand them, or did not want to—Ivan could hear everything and needed no interpreter.

"Where is he? Who ran in here?" shouted one German.

"Just now, I saw him!" another insisted.

"Gentlemen, I don't know what you're talking about, there's nobody here. What do you mean?" the old man muttered in Ukrainian.

Ivan immediately felt easier—the peasant, thank God, would not give him away; that was luck, anyway, perhaps they might not find him. He pressed close to the wall of the ashpit, rolled himself up into a ball and practically stopped breathing. The Germans shouted more loudly and cursed, a child in the corner began crying, a woman jumped down from somewhere, apparently from the top of the stove, and began to soothe it. One of the Germans, rattling his rifle bolt, ran into the room—a shadow passed the stove—the children cried more loudly still, the wooden bed creaked, probably the Germans were pulling the bedclothes off it. The Germans in their jackboots made a lot of noise, they glanced at the stove, rattled the damper and flashed an electric torch into the ashpit. The light struck the back wall of the pit and Ivan crouched well to the side expecting at any moment to hear one of the Germans shout " '*Raus!*"* But the light was weak (the battery must have

*Out! (Germ.)—*Tr.*

run down), the Germans didn't see anything and stamped away. Their footsteps faded and they seemed to be searching the other room. Ivan, keeping dead still, expelled his pent-up breath and then began to breathe more freely, scarcely able to believe his ears—had he really got away with it?

The footsteps died away altogether and the only sounds were those of the children sobbing beside the stove, and the mother, her bare feet pattering across the floor, must have run to look out of one window, then the next, to see what the Germans were doing. The peasant was saying something to the soldiers outside, probably sending them away. Very soon everything was perfectly quiet. Apparently the peasant came back into the outer room and his wife ran to meet him, saying something to him in very rapid tones and so upset she was almost crying.

"That's enough! Shut up!" her husband shouted.

The woman came back into the room and busied herself with the children. Ivan was about to crawl out and find a more reliable hiding place when the housewife began whining in a scared voice:

"Petro! Petro! Oh! Mercy, Grisha's coming."

Ivan again stopped breathing, the farmer went out and for a moment Ivan could not hear him. Then, a new voice, tauntingly respectful, came from the yard: "Good-day, *Pan* Petro!" The farmer answered the greeting with restraint and this was followed by a snapping sound as though someone was striking the shaft of his boot with a riding whip; then the same voice began again, in ordinary everyday tones, as though talking of some petty matter.

"Who are you hiding? Bring him out here!"

"I'm not hiding anyone, Neighbour Grisha! How could you say such a thing!"

"No one, eh? All right, we'll find out. Ganna!" shouted Grisha.

"I'm coming, Grisha."

"Who's Petro hiding? Tell me."

"How should I know? He's not hiding anyone."

"Not hiding anyone! You, Nastasia, tell me who your father's hiding."

"I don't know," answered a timid, childish voice.

"You don't know? We'll see," said Grisha with a calm but significant voice.

In the ashpit Ivan was in such a rage with the swine that he ground his teeth till his jaws ached. His one desire was to get out and plant a dozen bullets in the bastard's belly. But he had no idea of how many of them there were, and he was again filled with a premonition of evil; he realized that this man was no German and that he would do his work properly.

"Glukh, bring me some straw. And you, Zhupan. We'll soon find out where he's hiding."

Footsteps crossed the yard, somewhere nearby a door creaked—someone had probably run to a shed and Ivan realized what Grisha—may he die before Sunday!—had in mind.

"Will he really have the heart to set fire to the house of one of his own fellow-villagers, one who calls him friend and neighbour?" Ivan wondered in agony.

Something rustled under the window, the light in the ashpit grew dimmer—they were piling up straw, Ivan told himself; then everything was quiet, no footsteps and no talk. Suddenly the woman screamed in mad despair, they might have been burning her and not the cottage. Immediately the children followed her example; the room filled with smoke and Ivan decided that the game was up—he would be burnt to death and leave the family homeless, to boot. He must get out and shoot that bastard down, but he still had a faint hope that Grisha would not burn the house, that he was only scaring them. Then again, if he allowed the cottage to catch fire and then come out of his hole, would not that be too great a punishment for him and for the family that was sheltering him. Ivan did not know what to do, though he did know that he had to make a decision within a matter of seconds.

He would probably have crawled out of the ashpit (he was just going to) had not the woman run into the house, wailing and cursing. Before he could guess why, she was beside the stove.

"Get out! Get out!" she screamed through her tears, bending down to the ashpit. "They'll burn the house down because of you, damn you. Murderer, where did you come from? Get out!"

Ivan gave a sigh of relief; it was all over (although it was not the end he had expected), he pushed the submachine gun under the rubbish in the corner and crawled out. He was not angry with the woman, but it was a pity, and very disappointing that such a long and arduous journey had come to such a foolish end...

He crossed the threshold, calm and aloof. Four peasants in the yard gave him a wolf-like stare; one of them stood out among the others, a huge, gawky man in light-brown slacks and wearing a pale blue armband; that, presumably, was Grisha. He held a German carbine in his hands, Ivan recognized it by the bolt, and at the same time realized that the man would not kill him on the spot but would have to hand him over to the Germans.

And that was what happened.

10

Ivan's feeling of alarm did not leave him, he stood watching and listening, afraid the Germans would let the dogs loose. But time was passing and everything remained quiet. At last

he convinced himself that the Austrian really had not betrayed them, that the motorcyclists had not come across their tracks and were leaving the fugitives alone for the time being. They had, furthermore, probably picked up the body of the madman so that they had something to return to the camp with. These thoughts gradually replaced the alarm and excitement but they brought other cares and plans.

The rock crevice was a deep and winding corridor which, as it was becoming narrower and narrower, led them farther and farther uphill. They kept on climbing for some four hours or more. It grew colder and there was a slight singing in their ears—brought on by the height, most likely. The sun did not shine into that narrow crack, and finally the sparkling blue of the sky also disappeared behind the clouds; ragged wisps of mist clung to the sharp tops of the crags overhead. A squally wind that was increasing in strength blew from somewhere, it was getting very cold and even walking did not warm them. From where they were they could not see how far they had travelled from the town, but Ivan felt that they had reached a good height, otherwise it would not have been so cold. Still he did not put on the jacket that had the bread wrapped in it. He thought that the worst was still to come, that it would be much colder and they would probably have to walk across the snow. True, Ivan was not worrying much about himself, he could have walked much faster. Although he was tired, although his feet had been hurt by the stones and caused him pain, he was still capable of much more—how many times his great strength, his unfastidious nature and army training had saved him. It had often happened at the front and in the P.O.W. camp that when others had collapsed or weakened and dropped from hunger, fatigue and sleeplessness, he had stood up to it all. He had begun to hope that on this occasion, too, he would be able to stand it, that he would cross the mountain range (he absolutely must cross it) only to remain alive; he would be able to bear anything, he would put up with anything as long as he was at liberty and not in the camp...

But there was Giulia...

The girl was trying hard to keep up with him and did not now lag far behind, but he often stopped and looked back at her enquiringly and with caution. When Giulia felt his eyes on her she tried to smile in response, to pretend that everything was all right, that she was not afraid and that she was not exhausted. Nevertheless her slow movements, which did not match her impetuous nature, were the most eloquent evidence of her extreme fatigue.

There came a moment when, as they turned a bend, they saw that the crevice that had given them shelter had come to an end. Before them was a steep cliff. Little as they wanted to, they had to

climb that bare cliff, open to the winds.

Ivan turned on to the steep slope, scrambled up it almost to the top and there dropped on to one knee and awaited Giulia. She climbed somewhat more slowly, her head bowed; Ivan supported himself with one foot pressed into the cliff and held out his hand to her. The girl grasped it with her soft, cold fingers and he pulled her up.

They found themselves on a bare, steep rocky crest but had no time to look round. A strong wind struck them, ragged masses of mist came down from above and wrapped themselves around everything, a penetratingly chilly haze shut out the sky, bathing them in a kind of cold steam. The mist, it is true, was not solid, and through the breaks in it gloomy cliffs loomed here and there; there were bright patches, too, in the distance, but still they could not get a proper view of their surroundings. They stopped, and Giulia leaned against the cliff; it was colder than ever and the wind tore at her clothes and ruffled her hair. Ivan unrolled the yellow jacket on the ground, took out the bread and went over to Giulia.

"Oh, no, no, I very warm!" Her eyes suddenly came to life and sparkled as she turned them on the young Russian and held out her hand to him. Without another word Ivan hung the jacket on her thin, pointed shoulders and the girl, wrapping it round her, shivered from cold as she pulled her head down into the collar. He sat down beside her.

"Eat you, the bread?" She guessed his intention and swallowed her saliva in anticipation.

Ivan began by carefully studying the loaf, weighing it in his hand as though trying to determine its weight and estimate the ration they could allow themselves on this occasion; he heaved a sigh—the ration was a pitiful one. Giulia sat down and moved closer to him. Ivan was afraid of the loaf crumbling; he picked up a sharp splinter of rock and, after measuring the bread carefully, cut off a piece. The girl followed every movement of his fingers with joyful and tender devotion in her eyes, watching how he cut the bread and how he divided the piece he had cut into two equal parts, breaking a bit from one and adding it to the other.

"All right?"

"*Sî, sî,* all right."

Once again there was neither cold nor fatigue; Giulia's eyes gleamed as she waited impatiently for permission to eat her share. But Ivan, with enviable restraint, again broke off a small piece from one to make them equal.

"Turn round," he said at last.

She understood what he wanted and, without taking her hands from under the jacket, turned round while he put a finger on the piece to which he had added a bit.

"Who for?"

"*Russo!*" she answered readily and turned back to him.

Ivan picked up his little portion carefully, she grabbed the other somewhat more quickly.

"*Grazie,* thanks, *Russo.*"

"Nothing to thank me for."

"*Russo,*" Giulia called to him, chewing quickly and keeping the jacket wrapped round her. "What name you have? Ivan, yes?"

"Ivan," he agreed, somewhat surprised.

She threw back her head and laughed.

"Ivan! Giulia she guess. How she guess?"

"It's not difficult."

"All *Russo* Ivan, eh?"

"Not all, but there are some. Many."

She suddenly stopped laughing, sighed deeply from fatigue, pulled the jacket more tightly around her and glanced casually at the loaf of bread. Ivan, who was slowly finishing his portion, noticed that eloquent glance and took up the loaf to put it inside his jacket. Before he had time to unbutton his jacket Giulia suddenly exclaimed "Oo" and stopped dead. Sensing something wrong Ivan glanced at the girl and saw an expression of fear on her face—her wide-open eyes were fixed on something above his shoulder. With the bread in his hand Ivan turned round and saw what had frightened her.

At some distance from them a terrible-looking prisoner sat on a rock, leaning on his hands. His shaven skull on the end of a thin neck stuck out of the collar of a striped jacket; the number and badge on the jacket had turned black and the man's deep-sunken eyes seemed to be fixed as he stared at them. When he saw the bread in Ivan's hand he shuddered, jumped up and down and began to shout hoarsely.

"*Brot, Brot,* bread!"

Suddenly he stopped shouting, cringed, and in a perfectly human voice, filled with despair made his demand.

"*Gib mir Brot.*"

"Ho, is that all he wants!" grinned Ivan sarcastically, looking at him. The madman waited several seconds and then began to shout in German with unexpected anger.

"Give me the bread. Give it to me or I'll inform the Gestapo!"

"Gestapo, eh?" Ivan rose to his feet. "Get away from here! Get a move on!"

He moved threateningly towards the madman but before he could make more than a couple of steps the man had jumped down from his rock and with amazing agility was running downhill.

"Bread, no Gestapo. Give bread, no Gestapo!"

"You dirty swine," shouted Ivan against the wind. He was be-

side himself with anger and was going to run after the prisoner, but the latter took the precautionary measure of running farther away. When he saw Ivan stop, he stopped as well.

"*Gib Brot!*"

Ivan put his hand into his jacket and the German stopped in expectation; Ivan drew his pistol and cocked it.

"Pistol!" screamed the frightened madman, and backed away.

Ivan bit his lip; Giulia came up behind him.

"Give him bread! Give bread!" she said in fright.

In the meantime the madman had run clear of them, stopped, looked back and strode quickly downhill.

"Ivan, give bread! Give bread! No Gestapo!" the girl demanded in alarm.

"Treacherous bastard," thought Ivan, looking angrily at the swaying figure of the German. He was obviously a bad man to joke with, he'd make a noise and hand them over to the S.S., what else could you expect from an idiot. It would be a pity to kill him, but try and get away from him. They would come with dogs, get on their trail and that would be the end of them.

"Hi!" shouted Ivan. "Take the bread."

The madman stopped, held on to the rock and looked back. Soon his voice reached them through the wind.

"No. You'll shoot, I'll tell the Gestapo!"

Again he started off downhill.

"Go to hell! I won't shoot, *nicht schießen*! Here, take it!"

Ivan actually broke a piece off the loaf and held it up for the madman to see. Giulia, who was standing beside him shivering from the cold, looked at the mad prisoner in alarm. The madman sat down on an outjutting rock; he was afraid to approach them.

"You swine!" shouted Ivan, at the end of his patience. "Go to hell, go to the Gestapo, go where you like!"

"Ivan, no Gestapo! No, Ivan!" said Giulia, tugging at his sleeve. "Give little bread. No Gestapo!"

"Like hell I will. Let him go!"

"He bad *Häftling*. He sick. He go Gestapo..."

Ivan did not answer; he stuffed the half loaf and the pistol inside his jacket and returned to their former place. Giulia walked beside him in silence. He felt that it was dangerous to treat the madman like that, but he could not now go back—anger had proved stronger than common sense. Giulia looked back now and again, but darkness descended upon them and there was nothing to be seen but the grey pile of rocks—the penetratingly cold mist was swirling all round and down below them. They did not know whether the *Häftling* had remained in his place or had really gone back. Ivan could see the alarm on the girl's face.

"He won't go anywhere. He's lying."

He tried to calm her, but was not too sure of it himself. The devil alone knew what scoundrels a man's life might depend on! This man was sick, but he had remained alive, had reached the mountains and had evaded the chase, escaping under fire; could any man worth his salt have managed all that? But this one had remained alive and even threatened the lives of others. Ivan all but ground his teeth in helpless rage when he remembered how many of the finest fellows in the world, young people of all nationalities, had died in concentration camps. But what was the use of grinding his teeth—he had to be patient, he had to be able to withstand everything, otherwise it meant death!

They were about to make their way round a huge outcrop of stratified rock when Ivan looked back and put his hand inside his jacket. Giulia also looked back, but the madman was nowhere to be seen. Nevertheless Ivan got out the piece of bread, turned back and, looking for a suitable place, put it down on the stone beside which they had been sitting shortly before.

"All right. I hope he chokes on it!" he muttered as though to justify himself. Giulia nodded consent; apparently she knew all too well what treachery meant.

11

The wind blew incessantly, driving an endless procession of white wisps of mist before it. Ivan's jacket was soon soaked through—the cold damp set his whole body shivering. He kept looking back, beginning to doubt whether the madman would find the bread they had left him. He even felt an urge to go back and eat it himself; to get rid of this obsession he began to stride forward at a faster rate.

Soon they had rounded the huge buttress of rock that jutted up into the sky like the petrified tail of some giant bird. Directly in front of them a break in the mist revealed a bare rocky slope with a not very steep path winding its way up it through the boulders across the mountain-side. Though the path was not very noticeable among the rocks, they found it immediately and were pleasantly surprised.

Ivan was the first to reach it and he looked back at the gloomy rocks and cliffs still visible between the patches of mist, and at the hazy grey of the distance. Above them, high in the misty sky, the deep snow of the piebald mountain peaks glistened in the sun. When Ivan studied the mountains carefully he discovered that there was not one range but two—the further one was broad and mighty like the motionless back of a recumbent bear, and the nearer one, crenellated, was slightly dusted with snow and seemed higher than any other, its highest point almost touching the sky.

From where they were this seemed to be the highest range, but Ivan was already beginning to understand the deceptive law of the mountains which makes the nearest peak seem the highest. The distant Bear Range (as he named it) was obviously the main one, and he expected that beyond it he would find the longed-for goal of their journey—the partisan Trieste.

Ivan stood for a moment with his head thrown back looking up at this threshold to their future, and hoped fervently that there would be no further chase, that the worst was over, that they would not meet any more people and would have to fight only against nature, a fight that needed nothing but strength and endurance. Then he glanced at his silent companion whom the stern majesty of the mountains seemed to have charmed as she, too, gazed at the snow-clad heights. It was at that moment, probably for the first time, that he began to feel a quiet pleasure at not being alone in the face of the menacing mystery of nature, at having someone by his side. Warmth inundated his whole being, and with a light heart he used a word that had been among his favourite slang words from childhood:

"*Aidá!* Come on!"

She could hardly have understood such a colloquialism, but their feelings were by this time so much in harmony that she immediately repeated it:

"*Aida!*"

They followed the path that wound round the rocky slope. The low sun gleamed brightly between the patches of mist and in its rays the masses of mist transformed and shone with dazzling whiteness on the mountain-side; ragged black shadows, alternating with bright patches of sunlight, sped swiftly across the rocks and deep gullies. The wind blew incessantly, it tore at Ivan's jacket and set his trousers ballooning. Giulia raised the leather collar of her jacket. They continued to climb. In the bright sunlight they saw clearly the black mouth of a crevice and the stony slopes on which a towering, ribbed rock cast a long shadow.

Ivan looked down and suddenly stopped short—the mad *Häftling* was tramping around the place where they had recently been sitting.

"Look, he's clinging to us!"

"*Tragico,* that man," said Giulia. "*Peccato*—a pity."

"Why pity that bastard?"

"He want with *Russo* escape. He not *böse* with *Russo.* He afraid."

"He's right to be afraid," said Ivan drily.

He moved on, trying to put the madman out of his mind, although it was not very pleasant to know they had such a trailer behind them. What could they do with a sick man—they could not

drive him away, and there was no way of escaping him. Clearly, they would have to put up with him till nightfall.

"Ivan," said the girl, putting the stress on the wrong syllable, "you no angry Giulia?"

"Why should I be?"

"You no *böse?*"

"You needn't be afraid of that."

"No be afraid?"

"No."

The smile, however, soon left her tired face; her look was one of deep concentration reflecting an unpleasant train of thought.

"Giulia no afraid *Russo.* Giulia afraid snow."

Ivan, who was walking ahead, let out a deep breath; to tell the truth, the snow and their scanty supply of bread was beginning to worry him, too. He thought they should have taken more from the forester, shoes, in particular—it would be insane to go barefoot across the snow. But, as usual, he was wise after the event. At first they had not expected to reach the snowline and had thought themselves lucky to escape the round-up. They owed some thanks to the Austrian, anyway—if it had not been for him they would not have had any bread. Ivan moved swiftly along the path and their two long shadows, reaching to the very bottom of the slope, dragged along the hillside. He did not want to comfort his companion and merely remarked:

"You have your jacket. What are you afraid of? It's no use expecting a manteau here."

The girl sighed and then remained silent for a while.

"Roma Giulia have many manteaux," she recalled sadly. *Vier* manteaux."

That made him wary and he slowed down his pace.

"What? Four fur coats?"

"*Ja, vier. Chetyre,*" she added in Russian.

"So you were rich?"

She laughed.

"Not rich. Poor, *politischer Häftling.*"

"Not you, but your father. What's your father?"

"Father?"

"Yes, father, *Vater.* What's he?"

"Oh, *il padre!*" she exclaimed. "*Il padre è commerciante. Direttore della compagnia.*"

Ivan whistled softly. "Oh, great! All we need now is for that *padre* to turn out to be a fascist—what a wonderful promenade through the Alps it would be!" he thought. He turned round to her suddenly.

"Your *Vater* fascist?"

"*Sí. Fascista,*" Giulia answered simply. "Officer of the fascist militia."

"Oh, my God!"

He moved over to the edge of the path, allowed the girl to draw level with him and looked with newly aroused interest at her svelte figure that was shapely even in her rough clothing. The strange thing was that the striped clothing, made for a different figure, did not detract from her native maidenly charm that was evident in everything–in the flexibility and precision of her movements, in her tender, pleasant face, in her joyful and infectious laughter. She looked at him humbly and loyally, stuffed her hands into the sleeves of her jacket and clattered along as usual in her clumsy clogs.

"How about you? Maybe you're a fascist, too?" he asked cautiously.

The girl probably felt his poorly hidden suspicion and flashed her eyes at him.

"Giulia *fascista*? No, Giulia *communista*!" she announced with dignity.

"You?"

"Yes!"

"You're lying!" he said unbelievingly after a moment's pause. "What sort of Communist are you?"

"*Communista! Sí,* Giulia *communista.*"

"What, in the Party? Did you have a card?"

"No, not formally. *Moralmente communista!*"

"Morally! That doesn't count."

"Why?"

He did not answer her. What answer could he give to that naïve question? If everybody who thought he was a Communist were to be considered one, how many there would be in the world! And a bourgeois girl, too; who would accept her into the Party? Idle chatter. Having to some extent satisfied his curiosity, Ivan began to walk faster.

"We call Communist those who have Party cards."

"Oh, *Rußland? Rußland* different. I understand, *Rußland* is Soviet."

"Of course, it's quite different from your bourgeois country."

"Soviet very good. *Emancipazione. Libertà. Fraternità*. Yes?"

"So what?"

"That very, very good," she said in inspired tones. "Giulia very much like *Rußland.* No fascism. No Gestapo. Very good. Ivan lucky have his country, yes?"

She ran up to him and with both hands gripped his arm above the elbow.

"Ivan, how you live before war? Where your village? Was there signorina, girl, who love you?" she asked suddenly, looking penetratingly into his eyes. Ivan turned his eyes away indifferent-

ly, but he did not pull his arm away—he suddenly felt that her tender nearness was making something stir within him.

"What girl could I have had, I had no time for them."

"Why?"

"That's how it was, my life was like that."

"You live bad? Why?"

He felt that he had said the wrong thing, he did not want to speak about the way he had lived, especially as she apparently had her own ideas about his country.

"We had it every way, good and bad."

"Not true! Not true!" She gave him a cunning sideways look. "You love many *signorine.*"

"When could I?"

"What province you live? Moscow? Kiev?"

"Byelorussia."

"Byelorussia. That province?"

"No, republic."

"*Repubblica?* Good. Italy is monarchy. Any mountains in your *repubblica*?"

"No. Byelorussia is all big forests, rivers and lakes. Our lakes are wonderful." Memories of the past filled his head. "My village was called Tereshki, near two lakes. When the evening is calm, there's not a ripple on them. Like mirrors, they are. And you can see the trees upside down in the water. Just like a painted picture. Not a sound, only the fish splashing now and then. Pike ... this big! These mountains are nothing."

He had rattled off too much all at once—he realized that himself, and cut himself short. But his recollections had taken hold of his thoughts and his mind was now far away in his native land. This wilderness of rocks all round them brought on an unbearable nostalgia such as he had not known once during all the long time he had been a prisoner. She seemed to sense this.

"Talk again. Talk more your Byelorussia," she pleaded.

By this time the sun had disappeared behind the grey clouds. A swift shadow moved across the smooth slope, and the damp, grey wisps again chased one another along the mountain-side.

At first hesitantly, stopping frequently as though he were reliving his distant but still very dear impressions, he began to tell her about oak groves carpeted with acorns, about the beaver lodges in the lakes, about cool birch sap and whole groves of sweet-scented bird-cherry in May. It was a long time since he had used so many words; it was a long time, too, since he had opened up his soul to anyone—he did not recognise himself. And she, so genuinely interested in everything near and dear to him, grew much closer to him, as if they had long been friends and had just met again after a lengthy separation.

At last he fell silent. She slowly released his hand, but held on to his rough fingers loosely and calmly asked:

"Ivan, your mamma, she good?"

"Mamma? Very good."

"And *il padre,* the father?"

She was gazing dreamily at the mountain slope and did not notice the shudder that made his face momentarily gloomy.

"I don't remember."

"Why?" she asked in surprise and even stopped for a moment. He did not want to stop, and their linked hands stretched out between them.

"My father died when I was a little boy."

"Died? Why he died?"

"Just died. Life was too hard for him."

She let go of his fingers gently and drew up beside him, expecting him to say something important, to explain what she had not understood, but he did not want to continue.

"Ivan, you hurt? Yes?" she asked when they had gone a few more steps.

"How, hurt?"

"You lucky, Ivan!" Without waiting for his answer, Giulia seemed to have understood him in her own way and now spoke seriously. "You got big *Vaterland.* You win colossal war! That big, very big *fortuna.* But you hurt, hurt little bit, don't be hurt, Ivan..."

He did not answer, only sighed deeply, unwilling to carry on the conversation. What sense was there in her knowing all the difficulties and complications he had experienced.

12

That's what he was thinking as he scrambled up the steep path, sure that he had acted for the best. After all who was she? A pretty girl whom the vicissitudes of war had thrown into a fascist concentration camp; who was she that he should unburden himself to her and tell her of the difficulties he had had to overcome and which had demanded so much spiritual strength? Would she be able to accept the grim truth about his country, even if her heart was receptive and honest, when he was not sure he could understand it himself? She might show sympathy, but that he had no need of—he had managed without it for all the twenty-five years of his life. So let her think everything was good, as good as she imagined it—and he kept his own counsel.

Although he was deep in thought Ivan walked quickly and took no account of the time. Giulia realised that she had touched

a too sensitive spot in his soul and also kept quiet; she dropped a couple of paces behind and they continued their way upwards for a long time. In the meantime evening was spreading over the majestic masses of the mountains, a windy evening filled with alarm. The mountains grew rapidly dark, the distant scene, limited as it was, became still narrower, squeezed in a framework of black clouds; the silvery gleam of the distant range disappeared as the haze swallowed it up completely. The giant twin peaks of the nearer range stood out black against the faintly lit sky. There was probably a pass in the saddle between them, for the path led in that direction.

Ivan usually found the evenings oppressive. Day, night, morning—no other time of day was for him as sorrowful, as alarmingly forlorn and burdensome as the onset of twilight. He had felt this more strongly than ever during the war years, especially since he had been a prisoner, a captive, hungry and cold. In the evenings his loneliness, his sense of dependence on evil, implacable hostile forces became even more acute. How he longed for peace and tranquility and for a gentle, well-beloved soul by his side.

"Ivan!" She called out from somewhere behind him, "Ivan!"

She accented the first syllable as she always did, but her shout was so sudden that it gave him the impression there was a third person present. Ivan shuddered and stopped.

Giulia did not say another word but dragged herself towards him between the boulders and he realised what was wrong. He could see that she was tired and, indeed, he, too, felt that a rest would not come amiss. But at that breathtaking height the wind was unbearably cold and it tore at their clothing as it raged and howled in every crack and cranny. His hands were chilled and his feet were numb with the cold. It was growing still colder and the wind too, increased towards the night. Nature had descended upon the fugitives with all her blind, cruel force. Ivan was hurrying, for he realized full well that they could not spend the night there, that their only salvation was in movement and if they did not cross the pass that night the next day would be too late.

"Ivan," said Giulia as she drew close to him, "Giulia very, very tired."

He kept changing feet, standing on one foot at a time; his feet pained him but he tried to pay no attention to it. He gave Giulia a worried look.

"We'll have to manage it somehow—look, it's getting dark."

A thick black cloud appeared from behind the nearest peaks, rolled over and settled on the mountain-side. The light in the sky gradually faded and a tiny, lonely star flickered faintly and then disappeared in the deepening gloom; all around—the mountain peaks and slopes, the gullies and valleys—was all hidden under the grey pall of the clouds.

"Why we no come to pass? Where is pass?"

"We'll get there soon. Soon." Ivan tried to give the girl courage although he himself did not know how long it would take them to reach the saddle.

They again moved forward along the scarcely discernible path among the stones. Ivan was now afraid of losing sight of his companion, and began to walk more slowly, listening all the time for the customary sound of her clogs on the stones. At particularly steep places he waited for her, held out his hand and pulled her up, although his heart was beating so furiously it seemed ready to leap out of his breast. The wind tore madly at their clothes, striking them now in the back, now in the chest, knocking the breath out of them, whistling among the boulders and so frequently changing its direction that they could not tell where it was coming from.

It was soon pitch dark, the mountains merged into one solid mass and the black, starless sky became one with the mountains. It was so dark that Ivan began to stumble, to stub his toes against stones, sometimes very painfully, and for the first time he felt uneasy—where was the path? He bent down and looked carefully at the ground, then tried to feel for the path with his feet, but on all sides there were sharp ribs of stone and he realized that they had lost their way.

He straightened up, turned his back to the wind and waited for the girl to catch up with him. When she came limping up to him he said, "Stay here!" and himself went to the side. Giulia accepted his order in silence, almost indifferently, and dropped to the ground, cringing from the cold. Keeping his alarm to himself, Ivan went farther and farther away, looking at the ground underfoot and from time to time feeling the stones with his hands. There was no path. Gradually something began to glitter in the air—he held out his hand and realised that it was beginning to snow. Tiny hard snowflakes slanted down out of the windy blackness, collecting in the hollows and crevices. Ivan stood still staring into the darkness and thinking furiously, wondering what to do next. The snow came faster, down below it was growing lighter, and suddenly he saw a piece of the winding path not far away.

"Hi, Giulia," he called softly.

For some reason the girl did not answer, and he stood shivering, irritated at having to wait.

"What's happened now? Has she fallen asleep? What a companion God has sent me! Only good for a walk down the boulevards," he thought angrily. The wind was still beating savagely against the rocks, the snow was falling thickly and rustling as it swept over the stones; Ivan's feet were so cold they had grown numb. He hid his hands in his sleeves; the pistol inside his jacket had become so cold it burnt his bare body.

"Hi, Giulia!"

She did not answer and he, cursing to himself, went reluctantly, stepping cautiously on the wet stones, to the place where he had left her.

The girl was sitting on a boulder, curled up in a ball with the leather jacket covering her knees. She did not answer him, did not raise her head as he approached, and Ivan, feeling something was seriously wrong, stood still in front of her.

"*Basta,* Ivan. All over," she whispered without raising her head.

"What d'you mean, *basta*?" he asked her, after a short pause. "Come on, up you get!"

"No get up, no can."

"D'you think that's funny?"

No answer.

"Come on, get up. It's not far to the pass. Downhill your legs'll go by themselves."

No answer.

"D'you hear me?"

"*Finita.* Giulia no *marsch.* No."

"Don't you understand we can't stay here? We'll freeze to death. Look–snow!"

Those words did not make the slightest impression on the girl. Ivan could see that she was exhausted and he began to realize that his arguments were useless. How could he make her keep going? After giving the matter some thought he took out the badly squashed loaf, turned away from the wind, and carefully broke off a soft piece.

"Here, take this."

"Bread?"

Giulia eagerly raised her head. He pushed the bread into her hand and she immediately ate it.

"More bread?"

"I shan't give you any more."

"Little, too little bread. Give bread," she demanded peevishly like a baby.

"You'll get it when we reach the pass."

She stopped immediately and cringed away from him.

"No pass there!"

"What the hell d'you mean, no pass!" Ivan shouted angrily. "Come on, get up! What are you playing at? D'you want to die? Who d'you think you're spiting? The Germans? Or maybe you want to help them, to go back to the camp? That'd be great, they've been waiting for you for a long time!" he screamed, almost choking in the wind.

She did not change her position but threw back her head.

"Not camp!"

"You don't want to go to the camp? Where will you go, then?"

She did not answer and her head dropped again as she curled up into a tiny ball of living flesh.

"You'll freeze! Idiot, you'll be dead by morning," he said more softly, trying to convince her.

The wind drove the snow before it, whirling round overhead and between the boulders. Although it was very fine snow, the ground grew lighter and the path could be seen winding through the boulders. Ivan's body grew colder every moment when he was not moving, and it was becoming more and more unbearable.

"Come on, get up, will you!" Ivan pulled at her jacket and gave her an order in his sergeant's grim voice:

"Get up!"

Giulia rose slowly to her feet and plodded along quietly behind him, holding on to boulders so as not to fall. Ivan frowned as he walked slowly up the path. He was beginning to think that everything would sort itself out, that the worst thing that could happen to people in their condition was to lose the rhythm of movement; if they sat down it would require a much greater effort to get up again. They were almost on the path again when a sudden gust of wind blew the frozen snow straight in their faces and struck them so hard that it knocked the breath out of them. Giulia fell down.

Ivan tried to help her to her feet, he took her by the hand but she did not get up. She was coughing and for a long time could not get her breath. At last she sat down on a boulder.

"Giulia *finita. Alles.* Ivan Trieste, Giulia no Trieste."

"I wouldn't think of it."

Ivan moved away to one side and also sat down on a stone ledge.

"You called yourself a Communist. Panic-monger, that's what you are!"

"Giulia no panic-monger, Giulia partisan!" she objected hotly.

Ivan caught a note in her voice that told him she was hurt. "Perhaps that will make her move," he thought.

"Are you a coward, or what?"

"No coward, no panic-monger. Not much strong."

"You find strength," he said more gently. "D'you know what happened once at the front? At the *Ostfront.* Where you wanted to go. We were in a cottage, and there were Jerries all round us. We couldn't get out. They were firing tommy guns through the windows. And they were shouting, '*Russ,* surrender!' Our platoon commander, Petrenko, also said, '*Alles kaput!*' He took a pistol and put a bullet through his brain. We wanted to as well. Then our company commander, Belosheyev, he says, 'Hold it, fellows. Any idiot can shoot himself. That's not what we've got guns for. Come

on!' We rushed out of the house firing away, all in different directions, under the fence, into the kitchen garden, behind the house. And what do you think? Some of us got away. It's true five of the group were killed, Belosheyev too, but four of us survived; if we'd listened to Petrenko we'd simply have played into the hands of the Germans–they wouldn't have had to do any shooting even, only pick up the bodies and bury them."

Giulia did not say a word.

"Let's go, eh?"

No answer.

"Why the hell don't you say something?" Ivan's whole body was shaking from the cold and he felt his patience running out. "You'll freeze, you little fool. What did you run away for? What did you climb up this high for?"

Still Giulia did not answer him.

"What the hell did they want to blow themselves up for?" he asked, recalling his dead companions. "Somebody must survive... You've already given up..."

Frozen to the marrow from sitting so long in the wind, he got up and began walking up and down the path, his bare feet leaving dark prints in the snow. Luckily there was no frost–that would mean certain death. A minute later he stood in front of Giulia, determination written on his face.

"Well, are you coming or not?"

"No, Ivan."

"Please yourself. Die, if you want to," he said. "Take off that jacket."

With an almost imperceptible movement she shook off the jacket and laid it on a boulder. Then she kicked off her clogs and pushed them towards him, but Ivan pushed them back with one foot.

"Keep 'em ... to go back to the camp in."

He threw the jacket over his broad shoulders and pulled it together; he felt warmer. Ivan knew that the contact between them was going to pieces, for ever. He ought not to treat a woman like this, that much he could realize, but he was furious with her, he felt as if she had somehow deceived him and that was why he wanted to punish her. He cursed her under his breath but felt how difficult it would be to leave her. Their parting looked ridiculously brutal, although he was trying to drown this impression in his wrath. He could not help seeing how impossibly hard their journey had been for Giulia; she was right in a way, in her own way, of course, and he was being a bit unjust to her; Ivan sensed all this, and his anger was gradually subsiding.

He walked a couple of steps up the path and then turned round to her.

"Good-bye, then."

"*Ciao!*" Her tone and her attitude as she sat there hunched up on her boulder expressed her complete indifference. When he heard that word he remembered their meeting the day before, the cheerful glint in her sparkling eyes when she saw him among the trees, and her flabbergasting courage under the very noses of the Germans. It all upset him more than he wanted to admit; it was not sympathy or pity that was eating at him, but something else that made his heart twinge although there was nothing he could reproach himself for—he was not under any obligation to her. "No, no," he muttered, in an effort to shake off these conflicting feelings. "It'll be better this way." He had known from the outset that it is always easier to get away alone. He should never have got mixed up with her. Now he had a warm jacket on his shoulders, a small piece of bread (it would last longer if he were alone and economized, if he ate only a hundred grammes a day). He would bear all the hardships alone, he would cross the mountains and get to Trieste, to the partisans. Why tie himself to that girl? What was she to him?

He ran hurriedly up the slope as though he wanted to get rid of all thoughts of her as quickly as possible, forget that she was abandoned back there, down below; but his feelings got the better of him. Something hidden away inside him lived according to a different logic, his legs slowed down of their own accord and he looked back, once, twice... Giulia was an almost imperceptible dark patch against the mountain-side. Her submissive helplessness in the face of certain death suddenly made him abandon his intention. Without even wanting to, Ivan turned back and, unable to resist some inner impulse, ran downhill. Giulia heard him, shuddered and gave him a scared look.

"Ivan?"

"It's me."

"Why?" She seemed to have a vague idea of something and that put her on the alert.

"Give me your clogs!"

Obediently she slipped her feet out of the clogs and he quickly thrust his cold feet into those clumsy shoes that still retained her warmth. Then he threw off the jacket.

"Here. Put this on."

She still did not get up from her seat but swiftly pulled the jacket round; he helped her put her arms in the sleeves and when she was dressed he took her under the elbow.

"Come here."

She stepped back from him stubbornly, pulled her elbow away and stood aside, avoiding his hands. She looked at him curiously from under her lowered eyelids.

"Come here!"

"No."

"I'll 'no' you..."

With a single movement he caught her up, threw her over his shoulder and she beat at him, struggled like a little bird in his hands and said something he did not understand. He slung her on to his back and caught her under the knees. She suddenly stopped struggling and, to prevent herself from falling, put her arms round his neck; he could feel her hot breath on his cheek and then a hot tear that tickled his neck as it rolled down inside his collar.

"All right, all right... That's enough..."

She suddenly went limp and clung gasping to his broad back... He, too, was gasping, not from the wind but from that unknown, that wild and imperative, that majestic and amazingly helpless feeling that engulfed him, that came welling up from the unplumbed depths of his soul. His former intention of abandoning her now frightened him and he climbed steadily up the mountain pass, his clogs clattering over the stones.

13

The snowflakes now lay thick upon the rough stones; in the steeper places Ivan's wooden clogs kept slipping and so as not to fall with his burden, he began to edge his way up the hill sideways like a skier going up a slope. At first he did not feel the weight of her tiny body; he held her lightly by the legs and climbed stubbornly upwards. His initial burst of energy, however, gradually died down and gave way to a desire to halt, to straighten his back and to breathe freely—his lungs were in need of air. True, the exertion warmed him and the mountain wind now had little effect on his overheated body; inside, too, he was burning up, he was suffocating, his lungs ready to burst.

They were most likely close to the pass, the ground was beginning to level out, the path no longer zigzagged across the snow-covered rocky slope, and on the right some grey mass stood out clearly, apparently that was the other mountain; that meant they had reached the saddle. The wind was still displaying its mad fury and everything around them was groaning and howling and even ringing as though the wind were blowing down a huge funnel; as for the ringing—it might, of course, have been the ringing in their ears. The frost seemed to be increasing, biting mostly their hands and knees. It was a good thing for them the snow was hard and dry, wet snow would have stuck to their clothes; the wind, however, lashed them in the faces.

They should have halted for a rest, but Ivan realised that if he sat down he would probably never get up again. He kept on slowly

up the path for an hour or more. Giulia clung to him in silence, he felt her every movement and the strange thing was that despite his fatigue, their recent quarrel and his annoyance, he was now feeling good. If only he had strength enough he would be willing to carry her like that, clinging obediently to him, a long, long way.

Just as his legs were beginning to give way under him and he was afraid he might fall, a huge black rock loomed through the whirling, snowy gloom. Ivan turned off the path and turned towards it, his clogs sliding over the stones. Giulia was silent, her cheek pressed against his neck. When he reached the rock, Ivan turned round and leaned the girl against it. She unclenched her hands under his chin, his shoulders were freed of their burden and only then did he realize how heavy she had been.

"How d'you feel? Frozen?"

"No, no."

"Feet?"

"Feet, yes, frozen," she said softly.

All this time she seemed abnormally quiet, as though she felt guilty of something that concerned him. He could feel it and he wanted to comfort her in a nice, kindly way, but he did not know how to, he could not find the words for it, and so he remained outwardly as reticent as ever.

Without turning round Ivan felt her feet—they were ice cold, colder than his fingers. She uttered a soft cry as he touched her and pulled her legs up under her.

"You can't do that!"

Apparently she did not understand him, so he sat her more comfortably on the rock and picked up a handful of snow.

"Let me rub them."

"No, no!"

"Come on, none of your no's," he said insistently but not angrily; he took hold of one leg, held it between his knees like a farrier shoeing a horse, and began to rub her foot with snow. Giulia struggled, shouted and groaned but he only laughed.

"How is it now? Ticklish?"

"It hurt. Hurt."

"You'll have to bear it. I'll be gentle."

He rubbed her tiny foot, hardly bigger than a child's, as carefully as he could and then started on the other. At first she groaned and moaned but then she fell silent.

"Are they warm now?" he asked as he stood up.

"Warm, warm. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

She covered her feet with the skirts of the jacket and he leaned for a moment against the cold stone, trying to regain his breath. He felt cold as soon as he stood still, the wind blew straight

through his thin jacket that did nothing to warm him.

"Want some bread?" he asked her, remembering their last conversation further down the mountain.

"No," she answered immediately. "Giulia no want bread. Ivan *essen* bread."

"No? All right, we'll save it. It'll come in handy," he added and they swallowed their saliva almost simultaneously. Feeling he would freeze if he waited any longer, Ivan forced himself to get up; he made a back for Giulia.

"Up you get!"

She did not answer but readily put her arms round his neck and pressed close to him; immediately he felt warmer.

"Ivan," she said softly through the wind, breathing warmth into his ear, "Ivan, you *wunderbar*!"

"I'm not wonderful at all!"

She was beginning to feel quite comfortable on his back and felt, too, that he did not dislike her; this made her bolder.

"*Russo* all *wunderbar*, eh?"

"Yes, yes," he agreed since he was not used to talking about himself; furthermore, he thought the path would at any moment bring them to a gentle slope and he wanted to get past the steep part as quickly as possible.

"Ivan want frighten Giulia, yes? Ivan not leave Giulia, no?"

He laughed, embarrassed in the darkness and spoke with an assurance he would have liked to believe.

"Of course not..."

"Little heavy, eh?..."

"Oh no, like a bit of fluff."

"What that–fluff?"

"Fluff. Little feather."

"That little?"

"Yes."

The path they were following stood out clearly in the fresh snow. He was amused at the way the girl's breath tickled the back of his neck. Her thin fingers suddenly stroked his chest and he shuddered at that unexpected tenderness.

"You teach me speak your language?"

"Byelorussian?"

"Yes."

He laughed, it seemed that no question could have been more out of place under the circumstances.

"Of course I will. When we get to Trieste we'll begin."

The very idea aroused in him a number of unusually pleasant feelings. Would they really be lucky enough to get as far as Trieste and find the partisans? If they did they would never part company again on any account, they would join the same column. How im-

portant it was in a strange country to have a kindred soul by one's side! Ivan could feel her tender affection for him and her presence was no longer unwanted or burdensome. Only now that he had spent two whole days with her did he realize how lonely he had been all those war years—comradeship in the army was something quite different. There was something sisterly or even motherly about her warmth and interest in him and there was no need for any particular word, her silent proximity filled him with quiet joy.

They entered the saddle with the steep slopes of the two peaks rising above it on either side—the path zigzagged a little way and then obviously began to go downhill. The snow continued slowly falling in the darkness.

"Pass?" Giulia fluttered like a bird on his back.

"Yes, it's the pass."

"Oh Madonna!"

"And you wanted to give up! You see, we've got here!"

He stopped, stooped down to make her more comfortable but she dragged herself away from him.

"Giulia go herself. *Danke, grazie,* thanks."

He did not let go of her legs and the girl had to put her arms round his neck again so as not to fall. She sat with her cheek against his chilly shoulder and with a laugh ran her fingers round his unshaven chin.

"Oh, Ivan, you like *riccio.**"

"I'll shave in Trieste."

"Trieste! Trieste!" she repeated with a sigh. "In Trieste partisans. Ivan and Giulia—bang, bang, bang *tedeschi.* Fascist bastards!"

He listened to her chatter with a restrained smile as he carefully felt his way in the darkness. Downhill was much easier than uphill, but the clogs kept slipping and his knees were beginning to ache from the constant strain; breathing, however, had become easier. There was a constant risk of falling and it was a tremendous effort for Ivan to keep on his feet as he hurried downhill, at times with short, quick steps, at others actually running.

"Oh, oh, Ivan..." Several times Giulia let out little screams from behind him.

"Cheer up—hold tight!"

The wind had by now died down and that made it seem warmer. They could not see where the path was leading them or what awaited them at the end of it.

After a time the wind almost ceased, the snow also stopped, and on all sides, as far as they could see, there were piled-up,

*Hedgehog (It.)—*Tr.*

snow-covered rocks. The path twisted right and left making fantastic turns on the rocky slope which was not so steep on this side of the pass. Ivan was very tired and he walked on steadily without looking round, doing his best to keep to the path. Giulia, for some reason, had stopped talking. Once he tried to talk to her but the girl did not answer and he guessed why—she was asleep.

She had dozed off as she hung on his back and was gently snoring, her hands lying soft and gentle on his shoulders. The jacket had apparently opened up and he could feel the soft warmth of her breast on his sharp shoulder blades. As luck would have it, a pebble got into one of his clogs and a couple of times he tried to kick it out without bending down. Walking was difficult on account of it, but he did not want to wake the girl and kept walking slowly, on and on, downhill, for a long time. He was apparently dozing as he walked suddenly realizing he did not know where he was or whom he had on his back. Actually the spell only lasted a few brief seconds, then he was fully awake again; he felt her again and calmed down. Gloomy cliffs with patches of melting snow still surrounded them, but soon he felt dampness in the air that came from down below bringing with it the resinous smell of a conifer forest, and from somewhere far away came the noise of a waterfall. There was probably a narrow canyon over there.

By morning they were below the snow-line.

The patches of snow suddenly disappeared as though they had melted; the wind had died down, it had become warmer although the air was more humid, and wisps of damp mist came crawling up from the valley across the rocks. Lower down an aroma of grass, flowers and conifers filled the air and Ivan realized that the worst was already behind them. The path had disappeared but the going was easy and he did not look for it. After a short while he felt thick, soft grass underfoot, and he knew he might fall at any moment. Some tall flowers with hard buds on them lashed at his legs. Giulia was sleeping calmly. In order not to wake her, he knelt and then lay down slowly onto his side.

Giulia went on sleeping.

14

This time the usual alarming dream did not haunt him. He lay wrapped in deep untrammelled sleep for several hours and then a phantom mixture of delirium and reality filled his mind.

At twenty-five, youth is on the wane, many simple human joys will never return or will never be experienced at all if they have not been already; and in this sense Ivan Tereshka deserved better than what fate had prepared for him. True, the young man himself

rarely gave the matter any thought, he was no seeker after happiness; at home he had had to worry about how to live, make both ends meet, how to stand on his own feet. Later, during the war, he naturally had still more important things to worry about. There had never been time for love. He knew nothing about women and, as is often the case with young people, he was sceptical about relationships between boys and girls.

A couple of years before, Ivan, together with his company commander, Senior Lieutenant Glebov whose orderly Ivan then was, had been wounded on the Northwestern Front.

They were wounded in a forest when the commander was on his way to a briefing called by the regimental commander. His shoulder slashed by a shell splinter, Ivan still managed to pull his commander out of range of enemy fire, then bandage him up and drag him over the snow to the road where they were picked up by a transport column. Ivan's wound was not serious, he felt fairly well, but Glebov was in a worse condition. He had lost a lot of blood, his face was as white as a sheet, he could hardly speak but asked to be sent immediately to the doctor at the regimental base without going through the field hospital. The orderly knew what was troubling his commander—Glebov did not want to upset Anyuta, a tall, slim girl with big, bright eyes, a former medical orderly in their company who had been promoted to nurse at the field hospital. Everybody in the company knew that she and Glebov were not just amusing themselves, that their love was real; that was why Glebov had only the day before had her transferred to the field hospital which was not quite as dangerous as the front-line trenches. The soldiers in their company also loved the girl in their own way—they respected their commander and they respected his love. The orderly, Ivan, had his own special attitude towards her—probably because he knew Glebov better than the others he treated Anyuta as he would his young sister, and perhaps even better.

It so happened that Glebov could not bypass the field hospital. How could Ivan think of taking him to base when he was not sure that he would get him even to the field hospital alive? They were picked up by a horse sleigh which moved swiftly along the hard snow of the road and Ivan shouted at the driver, an elderly, slow-moving soldier who wore two greatcoats over his quilted jacket, to drive faster. Glebov began to lose consciousness, he became delirious, he cursed, did not recognise his orderly; nor did he recognise Anyuta, who fell on the sleigh with a scream when they at last reached the big tent of the field hospital.

Ivan would never forget that evening, the frosty starlit sky, the gloomy firs, the customary smell of smoke, the soft voices of the men in the ward, and, most of all, Anyuta's inconsolable grief.

They would not allow her in the operation tent, although she cried and tried to force her way in. Ivan also sat near the door and, forgetting his own pain, tried to catch every word he could about the commander's condition from the nurses who went in and out. The news was not of the best, the operation was a long and difficult one, they had given him transfusions of blood and salt solution. Ivan waited for a long time; he did not console Anyuta, he was deeply troubled himself—he just smoked and smoked until his tobacco pouch was empty.

Glebov died during the operation, the surgeon did not even have time to stitch up the wound.

This news caused something within Ivan's soul to turn to ashes. He never thought Glebov's death would affect him so much. Apparently, his own sorrow was made greater by the sight of another's grief. For several days Anyuta did not turn up for duty at the hospital and nobody blamed her for that; the wounded who lay on stretchers in the big marquee that served as a ward showed great respect for her sorrow. Only Ivan kept his thoughts to himself. It was then that he first realized that he had some special feeling for her—it was not love, rather, it was respect, nothing more.

During the long winter evenings in the field hospital he seemed to have forgotten how to laugh and joke; all he did was smoke endless home-made cigarettes from the raw tobacco called *makhorka* and stare at the glowing stove made from an oil barrel that medical orderly Akhmetshin kept red hot. He hardly spoke to Anyuta after that terrible evening and they understood each other well enough without words. When she returned to duty a short time later she had lost her former vivacity and had become contemplative and strict beyond her years. Their common sorrow brought them closer together. Ivan did odd jobs to help her in the ward but never said a word about what they had gone through and she was grateful to him for it.

Late in the evening, when Anyuta was through with her duties, she would often sit beside Ivan on a stretcher and gaze into the fire with him; at such times there was always someone in a dark corner telling some exciting war story or relating something pleasanter from the prewar past. And that made them feel good.

As time passed the wounded in the field hospital left, some were well enough to return to their units, others were evacuated deeper into the country. One day the peaceful calm of the ward was disturbed by a change that at first sight seemed unimportant.

After dinner, when Ivan was collecting the dirty mess tins to take them to the cookhouse, voices could be heard at the tent door and two orderlies carried a wounded man in on a stretcher covered with a sheepskin coat; he turned out to be a young officer wearing

the insignia of a major (it was later discovered that he was from a tank unit operating in support of their division). He was put into a comfortable corner, and the commissar of the medical battalion began fussing round him. As Ivan carried the mess tins out of the ward he wondered why all that fuss about a wounded officer. When he returned the major was already sitting up on the stretcher, he had taken off his coat now that he was warm and Ivan could see six orders gleaming on his broad chest. Everybody in the ward had fallen silent and was eyeing the officer with curiosity.

The major turned out to be a lively and sociable man who had been slightly wounded in both legs; he did not lie staring at the ceiling the way most people did in the first few days after they had been wounded, but quickly got to know the other men and the medical staff, became friendly with the nurses and was simple and pleasant in his manner towards everyone. In a couple of days his friends from the tank unit started coming to visit him, and once there were high-ranking officers among them. Sociable as he was, the officer nevertheless asked for a screen to be erected in his corner. The others were not very surprised—he was an officer and so it was understandable he should want to be screened off from the troops although such arrangements were unusual in wards for the lightly wounded. However, the major's request was granted and a sort of bunk appeared in the corner with sheets hung around it for privacy. From that time on the most interesting events in the life of the ward occurred behind those sheets.

Ivan began to frown, and at times with an effort suppressed what seemed to be unwarranted anger, noticing that Anyuta had again become vivacious and happy and would run as often as possible on some real or imaginary errand to the major's bunk. The major, of course, took notice of the lively young nurse and began to pay greater attention to her than to any of the others. One evening she stayed with him longer than usual. The major was talking to her about music, about some opera, and Anyuta was listening, asking him questions and, in general, showing too great an interest in his story. She was late in making her report to the orderly medical officer and got a reprimand as a result.

From that evening on she became still more vivacious; she fluttered lightly between the stretchers, joking with the soldiers and once even started humming a song. Apparently, she would not have guessed the extent of her treachery even then had she not glanced at Ivan at that moment. His look must have gone straight to her heart—Anyuta's song broke off suddenly, she dropped her roll of bandage and ran from the ward without stopping to pick it up. Naturally he did not say anything to her, he only tried to persuade himself that it could not be true, that he was imagining things and that she could not be like that! Glebov's love was like

an unhealing wound in Ivan's heart, and he tried to preserve that love, suffering on account of it more than he could have suffered on account of a love of his own, a love which he had not yet known.

It seemed that he was wrong in trying to calm himself. He noticed that Anyuta had begun to avoid him, she would not meet his glance, and was drawn persistently towards the major's bunk. Ivan became even more morose, he was growing thinner, almost stopped going for firewood, and it was other patients who now helped medical orderly Akhmetshin about his chores.

Several days passed.

One morning Anyuta was giving the major an injection. Day was just dawning, and "Katyusha" rocket mortars were sending up flashes from the direction of the front. Ivan was listening intently to every sound that came from behind the screen as he swept the earthen floor of the ward with a birch-twig besom; suddenly he saw two shadows outlined against the sheets. He saw Anyuta trying to struggle free from the man's clawing hands, but she made not a murmur. Ivan somehow managed to finish sweeping the floor and then lay down on a mattress in the corner oblivious to all that was going on around him; he lay there for a long time, wrapped in thought. When the usual morning bustle had died down he found his clothes, collected his equipment and walked out without bidding anyone good-bye.

By dinnertime he was back in his own company.

Next day, on returning from the field hospital where he went to get Ivan's ration voucher, the quartermaster told the soldiers about Ivan Tereshka's strange escapade. The boys only grinned a bit and then forgot all about it. But Ivan remained silent for a long time in the dark dugout. Who could guess what was going on in his soul! The wound in his shoulder gradually healed, but sorrow for his friend's betrayed love remained, and Ivan began to think that girls were not for him.

15

It was a feeling of warmth that brought him back to reality.

Not warmth, really, but heat, or even suffocation. He thought he was lying on a stretcher beside the oil-barrel stove in the field hospital, the stove that Akhmetshin had so mercilessly stoked. More than his legs, his head and shoulders were burning hot, and he could feel that he was sticky with sweat. He needed a drink very badly, and he wanted to turn away and shield himself with something from that blazing heat, but a drowsy fatigue overpowered him and he could not open his eyes.

And so he lay there half asleep until the dream gradually passed away. Ivan stretched, threw his arms out and suddenly felt the cold dew on the grass. With an effort he opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was a bright red flower close to his face that trustingly held out its four glazed petals to the sun; from the top of one of the petals hung a glowing, sparkling drop of water, transparent as a tear. The light morning breeze gently rocked the flower on its long stalk; farther away a wasp was buzzing drowsily in the lush grass. The deep buzzing soon ceased, however, and Ivan realized that all around him there was complete, all-embracing silence. He had long since grown unaccustomed to silence and it scared him; Ivan could not make out where he was, and, opening his eyes that were still red from sleep he forced himself to get up from the ground, and was pleasantly surprised at the dazzling, almost fairy-tale beauty of his surroundings.

In the unbelievably bright sunshine the huge grass-covered slope gleamed peacefully with a broad spread of alpine poppies.

The huge, luxuriant poppies that the foot of man had never disturbed owed their existence to the magnificent generosity of mother nature; millions of red burgeoning buds stretching far away downhill to the very edge of that mountain pasture-land waved in the light breeze. Ivan cast a glance at the distant view in the direction they had to go and his joyful mood was gone. Far beyond the valley rose the snow-clad heights of that massive range he had named the Bear Mountains. It was much higher than the one they had crossed, the one that rose up behind them in twin peaks, their huge shadow covering half the broad valley in a transparent lilac haze. The main range was no longer hidden by anything and showed itself to be the same glistening and unapproachable giant it had appeared the day before.

Ivan started—the alarming reason for the silence struck home at last. Where was Giulia? He looked round again—there was nobody to be seen, but the leather jacket lay close to him on crushed poppies. His first alarm was immediately allayed, for the pistol and the remaining third of the loaf lay on the grass and had apparently been covered with the sleeve of the jacket to protect them from the sun. Then he stood up and cast a feverish glance over the slope. Where could she be? Surely she had not?.. An unpleasant idea entered his mind but he could not believe it. He did not know why, he only knew it was something he did not want to believe—he was longing to see, hear and feel her beside him. Loneliness suddenly appeared to be worse than any failure.

He picked up the pistol and bread, pushed the jacket under his arm, and ran over the grass downhill. The dew-covered buds thrashed his swollen and lacerated feet; he looked back, remembering the clogs, but they were not there. Then he again strode swiftly

across the field, his legs creating a rustle in the dense growths of poppies and did not stop until he had walked quite a considerable distance; behind him lay the trail he had made through the dew-covered flowers. In all other directions spread the untouched red sea.

That gave him a hint. He tucked the jacket under his arm and went back.

There, in the dewy grass he found other tracks that led away towards a hollow and Ivan hurried in that direction. His feet and the legs of his trousers were soon wet from the dew, and the strong perfume of the flowers made him feel dizzy; as always, he was painfully hungry, black rings swam in front of his eyes because of hunger, fatigue and weakness. These were old sensations, he was used to them, and his hardened body and natural strength were able to oppose them; he felt that his strength was not yet all gone.

Trying to keep his alarm at bay, Ivan ran round a clump of rhododendron shrubs with red blossoms as big as his fist, and there he heard the sound of a waterfall coming from the direction of a small hollow. The noise grew louder, and he could see a stream of sparkling water falling from a black stone channel and dashing on to the rocks below. Fine spray filled the air with a thin mist and beside it a bright rainbow stood out against the gloomy background of rock. Ivan was unmoved by all this beauty, he ran higher up the hill and then stopped short and slowly sat down on the ground. Some fifty paces away Giulia was standing on a boulder under the countless tiny streams of the waterfall, her back to him, taking a shower.

Without her clothes she had lost the earmarks of a *Häftling* and, tête à tête with nature, seemed a different person in her modest, maidenly perfection, so full of mystery and chastity. The girl did not see him; cringing cautiously she held her thin, light body patiently in the dense spray of the waterfall. Ivan realized that the first tiny sound would make her flutter and disappear. Rainbow-hued patches glistened on her thin shoulders wet from spray.

Unable to overcome his shyness and joy, Ivan rolled over on to his back in the grass—a perfectly clear sky, without a single cloud, spread over him, and his head was dizzy from the intoxicating aroma of the earth. He stretched himself out on the damp grass and laughed softly to himself from a surfeit of happiness.

Deep down in his heart alarm still smouldered—before them was a mountain range difficult to cross, behind—it was clear what was behind them. But here, in this garden of great beauty, beside the person, lost and found, who had become dear to him, Ivan felt that his heart was as bright and clear as that of a child—he felt better than he had ever done during all his years as a prisoner of war. And he lay on the grass, thirstily drinking in this sudden,

inexplicable joy without even trying to discover where it had come from or what had happened to him—he was simply happy in a human sort of way. He soon realized, however, that it would not be for long; everything disturbing and difficult was not inclined to leave him alone in this world, and if it could be forgotten it was only because it had been replaced temporarily by the happiness that had suddenly taken him into its embrace.

He did not get up from where he lay among the poppies and did not once look at her, his delicate sense of modesty forbade it. As he lay on his stomach he picked the poppies nearest to him and mechanically formed them into a bouquet. A calm restrained gentleness came over him as he continued picking flowers until he heard hurried footsteps. He raised his head; there was no longer anyone under the waterfall; not far away, running in the direction of the place where she had left him, Giulia was putting on her striped jacket as she ran. He again laughed softly as he saw her gazing impatiently and worriedly into the distance, but he did not call to her; he picked up the leather coat and trailed behind her.

She ran quickly round the rhododendrons, her jet-black wet hair glistening in the sun, and stopped suddenly beside the patch of crushed poppies. Even from a distance it was easy to see that she was frightened and puzzled as she looked first in one direction and then in another and then set off down the slope. An instant later something made her turn round.

"Ivan!"

Fear, relief and joy sounded all together in that exclamation, and she clapped her hands and ran to him, arms outstretched, like a young bird. Ivan stood still. It seemed an age since he had last seen those flashing joyful eyes, the tender tan of her cheeks and the tangle of her cropped hair. His whole being was eager to rush to her but he restrained himself and did not even speak. But she, crushing the poppies under her clogs, jumped up and threw her two arms round Ivan's neck and, hanging in the air, burned his lips with an unexpected cheeky kiss.

He held his breath, but she, her arms still round his neck, threw back her head and laughed looking him lovingly in his face that was burning from the touch of those cold, firm lips. Then, still laughing, she unclasped her hands, pushed him lightly away and dropped on to the grass. Her eyes were sparkling and laughing; her jacket, fastened only by one button, flew open displaying a small enamelled cross in the hollow between her breasts. The cross drew his attention for a moment but she immediately realized it and fastened her jacket, still laughing with her eyes, her face, her wide mouth, with every inch of her youthful body that was still cold from her shower.

He, however, suddenly frowned and stood motionless for

something like half a minute feeling that something inside him was giving way, that some unknown force was bending him to its will. Now he no longer resisted it but submitted because there was joy in that submission; he took a step towards the girl. Giulia stopped laughing abruptly and jumped to her feet.

"Ivan!" she exclaimed, "that surprise for signorina, eh?"

Only then did he realize that he was clumsily holding a bouquet of poppies in his hands, and he laughed. She laughed, too, smelled the flowers, burying her tiny face in them. Then she laid the bouquet on the grass and began quickly plucking all the flowers around her.

"Giulia thank Ivan. Thank, many, many thanks..."

"You don't have to, why?" Ivan tried to stop her.

"Many, many thanks. I must thank. Ivan save signorina! Russian save Italian girl! That is *bravo,*" she said with enthusiasm as she showered all the flowers on his chest.

"What are you doing? Why?" he protested.

"It's right, it's right," she insisted, pronouncing the Russian words in a funny way, and he had to grasp her and the flowers in his arms together with the leather jacket and the bread that was wrapped in it. Giulia must have felt the bread and suddenly became serious.

"Bread?" she squealed.

"Yes, let's eat." Ivan livened up, put everything down on the ground and sat down himself. Giulia willingly sat down beside him.

16

"We could eat it all at once," said Ivan. He held in his hand the stale bread, about a kilogramme in weight; it was squashed, the edges had been broken off, but it was still so appetising and desirable that they both swallowed their saliva just looking at it.

"All, all," agreed Giulia, like an echo, unable to take her eyes off the bread.

Ivan looked over her head at the distant snowy mountain range and sighed.

"We can't eat it all."

"Not all? No?"

"No."

She understood him and also sighed; Ivan spread the leather jacket on the ground and placed their pitiful rations of bread on it. He had to measure two equal portions.

He carefully divided the bread, breaking each piece into two, all the while seeing that Giulia was impatient with hunger. A new

feeling towards her was developing in him, something either fraternal or paternal, something great and good. It was this something that gave him great respect for her, so maidenly in her complete lack of fitness for the terrible vicissitudes of war and so stubborn in her almost subconscious, bird-like striving for liberty.

Ivan concentrated on rationing the bread. Each little piece, each crumb, was carefully weighed by their keen eyes. He deliberately made one portion bigger than the other, because that other was the heel of the loaf, and camp logic said that a crust was more valuable than soft bread of the same weight. When he was through, Ivan put the remaining piece of the loaf into the pocket of the leather jacket.

"That's yours and that's mine," he said simply, without the traditional ritual of choosing and pushed the portion with the crust towards her.

Her jet-black eyebrows flew up and she said resolutely:

"No. That Ivan's, this Giulia's." She changed the places of the portions. Ivan looked into her face and laughed.

"No, Giulia, you're wrong, that's yours."

He quickly picked up his own portion from the jacket. Giulia frowned with mock dissatisfaction and with a sudden movement pushed a piece of the crust from her portion into his hand. He tried to give it back to her straight away, but she raised both her hands with the bread in them, so that he could not get at it. With the same mock stubbornness, Ivan did reach it, and she, trying to dodge him, involuntarily brushed her breast against him and then grasped his shoulder so that she would not fall. Her laughter ceased abruptly. Her sudden proximity made him draw back—with an effort he suppressed the burst of joy he felt, moved to one side and sat on the skirts of the leather jacket. She smiled slyly in her girlish way, her eyelashes fluttered, she bit her lip and began to straighten the jacket on her breast.

"Take it and eat. It's yours," he said and pushed the crust towards her.

"No."

She began to bite at her portion, her teeth flashing and her eyes gleaming with impudent stubbornness.

"Take it, I tell you."

"No."

"Take it!"

"No," she said, not giving way to him—but her eyes were smiling.

"Pigheaded. As you please," he said and set about eating his own ration.

She quickly swallowed all hers, was still hungry, of course,

and began to look furtively at the bulging pocket of the leather jacket. Ivan noticed her glances; he began to wonder himself whether it might not be better to eat it all up and satisfy their hunger at least once. But with a tremendous effort of willpower he drove away the thought. He knew all too well the value of even that tiny piece they had left.

"Want some more?" he asked at last, when he had finished chewing his own portion.

She shook her head with exaggerated determination, as if she were afraid of changing her mind.

"No! No!"

"And this?" he asked, nodding towards the crust that still lay in the middle of the jacket.

"Giulia no want."

"Then let's eat a half each."

"*Was ist* half each? Giulia no understand."

The girl wrinkled her nose enquiringly. The sun was shining in her face and she grimaced as though she were teasing Ivan.

"One piece for Ivan, one piece for Giulia."

He broke the crust and gave her one piece—she took it uncertainly, bit off a small piece and began to suck it.

"Good. *Cioccolato* for *Häftling*!"

"That's how it is—bread is chocolate to us."

"Giulia once run away Napoli, there eat much *cioccolato.* Not much bread but much *cioccolato,*" she said, screwing up her eyes, black as black can be.

Ivan did not understand her.

"You ran away to Naples?"

"*Sí.* From Roma. From *il padre.*"

"From your father? Why?"

"Oh, *una*... One history," she answered grudgingly, bit off another piece and sucked it.

"Father want give me bad *marito,* husband."

Husband! This unexpected piece of news burnt into his brain, he clenched his teeth and frowned. She seemed to feel it, and gave him a sly look out of the corner of her eye; then she laughed at his scowling face.

"No *marito.* Signor Zangarini not my husband. Giulia no want Signor Zangarini."

Ivan was still scowling.

"Why didn't you?" he asked.

"That was ... *un segreto.*"

"A secret, eh?"

She kept glancing impishly from side to side, then at him, all the time sucking at her crust; he sat looking at the ground pulling up tufts of grass by the roots.

"*Segreto,* little *segreto!* Giulia love ... how you say? *Un giovanotto*—young man, Mario."

"You did, did you?" he asked and threw the grass into the air, the wind scattering the blades in all directions. Ivan turned away from her, somehow he no longer wanted to look at her and listened despondently. She did not seem to notice the change in him and continued.

"Very good young man. Giulia take pistol and run away to Mario in Napoli. *Guerra,* war in Napoli. *Italiano schießen Deutsch.* Giulia *schießen,*" she sighed. "Partisan in Italy not many, *tedeschi* kill many Italians. Many in concentration camp. Giulia sent to camp."

"D'you mean you fought against the Germans?" he asked, trying to guess what she meant.

"*Sí.* Yes."

"Oh!" he exclaimed in restrained surprise. "Where's your Mario now?"

"Mario *fu ucciso*!"

"Killed?"

She did not answer immediately but sat with her knees pressed against her chest, her pliant arms grasping her long legs; she rested her chin on her knees and stared into space.

"*Sí.*"

They did not speak for some time. Ivan, however, managed to overcome his awkwardness and looked up at her; she had become serious and met his glance. Warmth began to appear in her eyes as he looked at her, her short spell of grief melted away and she laughed.

"Why Ivan look, look, all the time?"

"No reason."

"What that mean?"

"That's what it means. Let's go on to Trieste."

"Oh, Trieste!"

She jumped up lightly from the grass; he too, got up and threw the leather jacket over his shoulder with a sudden, bold, sweeping movement. They walked side by side down the poppy-covered hillside.

The sun was getting hotter. The shadow of the Bear Range grew shorter as they descended into the valley, a heat haze hung trembling over the distant foothills and covered the wooded slopes, only the snow-covered peaks still gleamed brightly so that every patch on their sides could be seen.

"Trieste good. Partisan in Trieste! Sea in Trieste!" Giulia chattered vivaciously and then began to sing softly because of her exuberant pleasure.

Mi par di udire ancora
*La voce tua, in mezzo ai fiori.**

He had no idea what the song was about but its melody somehow reminded him of the sea with a swell running. There was something calm and good, something charming about it.

Per non soffrire,
Per non morire,
*Io ti penso, e ti amo.***

Ivan held his breath as he listened to this melodious voice that came to him from another world, a world he knew little about. Suddenly the girl stopped singing and turned to him.

"Ivan, Giulia learn *Katyusha!*"

"*Katyusha?*"

"*Sí.*"

And she began singing, twisting the Russian words out of all recognition as a child might; he would never have recognised it but for the tune. She sang it to the end and then threw back her head and laughed.

"Why Ivan laugh? Very funny, eh?"

Very patiently he told her the words, very slowly so that she could learn them.

She listened to him with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Good," she said, again throwing back her head. "I understand."

She then sang the song again with all the zeal of a schoolgirl, carefully enunciating the words; she was like a happy, loving and obedient child, and she made him feel good. He walked beside her smiling inwardly with a sheer human calm and fresh happiness, such as he had not known for many years. He did not know where this feeling had come from or why it had come—was it from the clear sky and generous sun, from the picturesque charm of the mountains, from the wide open expanses all around them or, perhaps, from the unparalleled glory of the poppies whose pungent aroma seemed to fill the whole valley. There was a breath of something festive, something that went straight to the heart about everything among the mountains and grasslands; it seemed impossible to believe in danger, imprisonment and possible pursuit—he even began to wonder whether he had not dreamed the night-

*Still to this day I hear
Your voice among the flowers. (It.)—*Tr.*

**In order not to suffer, in order not to die, I think of you and love you. (It.)—*Tr.*

mare of the concentration camp and the S.S., death, the stench of crematoria and the hated baying of dogs. If all this had really existed how could there also be such an earthly paradise close beside it? What vital force separated the purity of nature from the criminal lunacy of man? The loathsome past, unfortunately, was no dream and no phantom—their striped clothing was evidence that it existed and that they had not yet completely got rid of it. And there and then, in the midst of the fragrant purity of the earth, Ivan tore off his striped jacket and covered it with the leather coat, such hatred towards their clothing did he feel. Giulia stopped singing and looked, smiling, at his broad, powerful shoulders.

"Oh! *Ercole!* Hercules! *Russo* Hercules!"

"Who's a Hercules! I'm a skinny rake!" Ivan objected modestly.

"No, no, Hercules!"

She slapped him jokingly on his broad back and squeezed his arm with her two hands.

"Strong, *Russo.* Good. Why you go prisoner?"

"Go. They took me, that's why I went."

"Must kill *fascisti!*" She shook her tiny fist with an air of determination.

"I killed them as long as I could, and then..."

He raised his elbow and turned his other side towards her, and her mobile face at once took on an expression of great pity, almost of fear.

"Oi, oi, *Santa Maria!*"

"That's the sort of Hercules I am," he sighed.

"Does it hurt?" She put her fingers cautiously on the huge, broad scar that had been left by a German bayonet. He rubbed his side vigorously.

"No, it's finished hurting."

"Oi, oi."

"Don't be afraid, you silly girl," he said gently. "Now squeeze it harder."

She did not dare touch it and he took her thin fingers in his hand and pressed them against the wound. Giulia gave a little scream of fright and pressed close against him. Ivan shuddered—her brief touch compelled him to withdraw. That was no good! He must not allow himself to grow slack. They must get going as quickly as they could.

"Listen," he said frowning and casting a brief glance at her. "We have to *marsch, marsch,* d'you understand?"

"*Ja,*" she agreed smiling and looking into his eyes with some secret thought in mind.

17

They went downhill from the snowline well into the pasture-land. The poppies were not so thick lower down and their place was taken by other flowers. Here and there they saw patches of blue forget-me-nots, harebells nodded in the sun, and the powerful aroma of azaleas made them dizzy. In some places there were stony bald patches among the flowers, and near these patches there were always a lot of sharp granite chips that played havoc with his bare feet. Ivan began to choose his path more carefully, watching the ground as he went. Once a tiny drop of red flashed out of the grass before his eyes; he stooped down and picked a number of big wild strawberries from among their velvety leaves. As he picked them he noticed some more nearby. He laid down the leather jacket and sat on the ground, Giulia happily following his example.

There were very many berries, big and juicy, and almost all of them ripe. Ivan and Giulia gathered them and ate them voraciously, by the handful, forgetting about the time and about the danger. A long time had passed, the sun had moved to the opposite side of the sky and now lit up the whole valley with its patches of woodland, and the Bear Range with its multitude of gullies and crevices.

The perspiration was pouring off Ivan as he crawled over the ground in search of berries; hearing footsteps behind him, he turned to face Giulia, wiped the sweat from his brow, and sat up on the ground.

She ran quickly up to him, hiding a sly smile in her lively eyes, knelt down in front of him and unfolded the corner of her striped jacket. A whole pile of strawberries lay on the juice-stained jacket.

"*Bitte, Russo* Ivan," she said in deliberately haughty tones, offering the berries.

"Why? I've eaten enough."

Seizing a handful of berries she almost forced him to eat them. Then she ate a few herself and again held a handful up to his mouth. The berries somehow had a different taste when he ate them from her hand—better than when he ate them one at a time. Gathering them all out of the palm of her hand with his lips he playfully bit at the warm, aromatic skin of her hand.

"No, no," Giulia said with a mock threat.

They ate up all the berries she had gathered and then Ivan picked up the leather jacket that lay among the poppies.

"*Aida,* come on?"

"*Aida,*" she agreed.

They seemed pleased with each other and much closer as they walked on. Giulia trustingly placed a hand on his shoulder.

"There's nothing like wild strawberries," he said, breaking

the friendly but somehow awkward silence. "Before the war I fed on them several summers. Wild strawberries and milk."

"Oh, *Russo vegetariano!*" she said in amazement. "Giulia not, Giulia like beafsteaks, spaghetti, omelette."

"Macaroni as well," he added, and they both laughed.

"*Ja, ja, maccheroni.* And *Russo* eat wild strawberry?"

"Sometimes. The belly teaches all arts," Ivan had to agree gloomily. Giulia looked at him in amazement.

"*Rußland* hungry? Why hungry? *Rußland* how hungry? *Rußland* very rich, eh?"

"Of course, that's true enough."

"Then why hungry? Tell me!" she insisted. She was obviously worried at what he had said.

He did not answer immediately but strode on across the grass; he was wondering whether it was worth while telling her about the past. He was already sure that she was well-disposed towards him and he was attracted by her which accounted for the need he felt to be frank, a feeling he had not experienced, for a long time.

"It happens, when there's a bad harvest. In 'thirty-three, for instance. We ate grass..."

"What grass?"

"What grass?" He bent down and pulled up a handful. "This grass. Minus the flowers, of course. My father died of hunger."

Giulia stood still in amazement and there was a troubled look on her serious face. She gave Ivan a searching and at the same time suspicious look; she did not say anything, however, only let go of his hand and withdrew into herself. He strode on in silence, saddened by memories that were far from happy.

Yes, there had been hunger at other times, too... Usually potatoes saved them, but there were not always enough of those to last till the next harvest. His father died leaving four children. Ivan was the eldest and he had to help his mother bring up the others and feed them. Hard, terribly hard, those times had been!

He walked on wrapped in thought, looking downhill to where the grey clogs on her feet appeared in the grass and their two short shadows floated before them. Giulia, however, began to lag behind, and he felt some peculiar change in her mood, but he did not look back.

"You go Siberia? Was kolkhoz bad?" There was a kind of challenge and a cold look in the girl's eyes.

With a feeling akin to fright he stopped short and looked keenly at her.

"What d'you mean? Who told you that?"

"One bad *Russo* say. You want say same, I know!"

"I?"

"You! Say it!"

"I don't want to say anything. What can I tell you?"

"You say Giulia no right, say she make mistake."

He looked at her; there was anger in her face, her eyes were bright pin-points, her recent kindly disposition towards him had disappeared; he tried his hardest to understand the reason for these changes and to get the meaning behind her unpleasant questions.

"You speak! Speak!"

Apparently she had really heard something, in the camp perhaps, or even in Rome. He could not explain anything to her and he regretted having mentioned the hunger.

"There was injustice?" Giulia persisted.

"What injustice? What are you talking about?"

"People sent to Siberia, eh?"

"To Siberia?"

He gazed searchingly into her scornful eyes and realised that he would either have to tell the truth or invent something. He wanted to put a stop to the conversation altogether.

"It did happen that some of the *kulaks*..."*

Giulia bit her lip in sorrow.

"It's not true!" she shouted suddenly and her glance seemed to strike him physically, there was so much sorrow, hurt and open hostility in her eyes. "No true! No! Ivan like Vlasov!"**

She suddenly burst into tears and covered her face with her hands. Ivan stepped towards her in fright, but she stopped him with a categorical "No!" and ran to one side across the slope. He stood wondering what to do looking after her in embarrassment. His thoughts were all mixed up, he felt that something awkward, something unsaid and foolish had happened, but he did not know how to set things right.

Giulia ran as far as a small, bare mound, climbed on to it and curled up with her legs bent under her. She did not give him a glance.

"So that's it! Vlasov!" said Ivan to himself, flabbergasted. He sighed deeply and stamped along through the grass. It seemed he had done something really bad—he had thoughtlessly destroyed the understanding between them that he had built up with such difficulty and which he needed so badly; the realisation of this loss pained him terribly, the calm joy he had recently felt faded away and he was lonesome and bitter at heart.

*In the 1930s a very large number of rich peasants (*kulaks*), considered to have accumulated their wealth at the expense of the poorer population, had their property confiscated and were banished to Siberia.—*Ed.*

**Vlasov—Soviet general; during World War Two defected to the German side; Commander of the army recruited by the Nazis from among Soviet prisoners of war.—Ed.

She had, of course, heard something of what had happened in his country in those years; perhaps she imagined it quite different from what it had been, but how could he now explain to her so that she would understand and not be angry with him.

Ivan stamped about over the same bit of ground, throwing the jacket from one shoulder to the other; his shoulders and the back of his neck were badly burned by the sun, and no matter how much he thought about it, he could not puzzle out what he had done wrong. Perhaps it would have been better to keep quiet about the hunger and the *kulaks.* It was distasteful to hide the truth, of course, but in the circumstances it would have been better to do so. It was a great pity to be deprived of her trust now they had gone through so much together. At the same time Ivan felt that it had nothing to do with him—that in the hearts of both of them something great and important was coming to life, something which made all calculating seem petty.

Now he did not know what to expect next! He could well imagine how Giulia would have received the truth told without any beating about the bush—how could she have understood the full complexity of all that had been going on in his country?

Say what you might, he really was in a difficult position now.

Too bad! Still, he would not lie to her, he would tell her everything, exactly as it had been, and if the girl had a feeling heart in her breast she would realise that he had nothing to do with Vlasov, and she would understand him and his people properly—they were certainly worthy of it. All this came to Ivan suddenly and very clearly; it set his mind at rest and he grew calmer as though he had taken a decision and all he had to do was await results.

18

Ivan, however, did not have the patience to wait.

Giulia was sitting some distance away with her back to him; she was scratching the ground pensively, and he picked up the jacket and went to her. She heard him, shuddered, glanced at him protestingly, jumped up and ran further along the slope. He climbed slowly on to the bare rock and stood still. He had to wait—or perhaps go on—he simply did not know what to do. The girl ran a little way and then disappeared, without looking back, behind a big boulder that jutted up out of the grass like a huge fang.

He dropped the jacket to the ground and lay down on it, deciding to wait patiently and see what would happen.

It grew warmer. The limestone, overgrown with coarse grass like sedge, gave off an odour of dry, dusty heat, as a Russian peasant

stove when the fire is out. Ivan's bare shoulders and back suffered from heat and sweat and all round him tiny flies of many colours swarmed in the grass. Now and again he glanced at the boulder behind which Giulia was sitting, but she did not show herself and he began to doze, worn out by the heat, the stifling atmosphere and the uncertainty of what he was waiting for. The berries or the heat seemed to have dulled his hunger but he badly wanted a drink.

"As if there weren't enough trouble without that!" he thought. He realized that he ought to keep going, get as near as possible to the snowline, look for some way across the range and find some food. Actually things had turned out more than awkward in a flight that had begun very auspiciously. To prevent himself from falling asleep, Ivan began to dig in the ground with a stone splinter; a huge black beetle with enormous pincers appeared from somewhere in the grass; the beetle, apparently surprised at the sudden meeting, stood still and rolled its lobster-like eyes, waving its long mobile whiskers menacingly. A light touch from the stone toppled the beetle on to its side with its six pairs of legs outstretched.

Ivan had lifted his hand to flick the undesirable insect away when he heard footsteps behind him.

He turned round so sharply that the man, probably from the suddenness of the movement, gasped loudly and sprang to one side with enviable agility. He had crept up quite close and was now standing in the grass looking pleadingly at Ivan with insane eyes. That same mad *Häftling* had caught up with them.

"Welcome!" Ivan laughed ironically. "So we're still alive, are we?"

Ivan was amazed to see him there—wild, exhausted, black with sweat and dirt, and with an almost inhuman expression on his gaunt face, his jacket unfastened and his trousers in rags. What was more, he was lame and scarcely able to stand on one leg. But even in that condition, the German had somehow dragged himself over that distance—his doggedness was something to envy—following them like a phantom although it was anyone's guess what he expected to gain.

"*Brot!*" He said that one word softly, despairingly.

"Again *Brot*?" Ivan was angry and surprised. "D'you think you're on our ration strength?"

The madman made a few hesitant steps towards Ivan.

"*Brot!*"

"You wanted to go to the Gestapo, to your Hitler."

"*Hitler nicht. Hitler kaput!*"

"*Kaput?* He should've been long ago."

The German could hardly have understood Ivan, but he stood there with his bony arms spread out; he waited, patiently but warily.

"All right, Fritz!"

Ivan put his hand inside the leather jacket and broke off a small crust of bread without taking the loaf out. When he saw the bread in Ivan's hand, the German brightened up, his eyes gleamed and he held out his shaking hands in torn short sleeves.

"*Brot. Brot!*"

"Catch it! And clear off!"

Ivan tossed the bread to him but the German did not manage to catch it; he threw himself headlong to the ground and seized the bread together with grass and sand. He sprang up, looked round fearfully, and then made off with mincing steps, faster and faster, sideways down the slope as though expecting a chase and fearing it.

"Perhaps he'll leave us alone," thought Ivan. The German was more dangerous behind than ahead of them. Ivan kept his eyes on the madman until he disappeared in a hollow and then lay down again on the jacket.

The anger he had felt for this man the day before had faded although he still did not pity him—his mind was still too full of memories of the numberless people the Germans had killed. He might, of course, be a convinced anti-fascist who had been reduced to a brute state by the cruelty of his compatriots; he might also be a nazi who had had bad luck during his heartless service. There were such people in the concentration camps. Their *Kommandoführer* Sandler, for instance, would not have earned any praise for the explosion of the bomb and the subsequent escape of the prisoners and, if he were still alive, might well be behind the barbed wire with those he had failed to keep guard over. Incidentally, there too he would be the one to give orders and might even have some authority (and they'd call him *Häftling!*). He had been a swine in his attitude towards people and would remain one; his personal failure would only increase his hatred for the prisoners.

The fascists had gone very far with their *Entmenschung*—dehumanisation—the foulest of all dark deeds ever performed on this earth. Their brutality towards those who thought differently from them could, in a way, be understood, but their merciless cruelty to those of their own people who had somehow failed to please the high-ups was simply incomprehensible. The main motive force for their actions became fear, fear of punishment from those above them; everyone lived under threat of summary justice, of demotion, despatch to the front or repressions against relatives. That was probably the reason they took ruthless vengeance for their own fear on those they were allowed to wreak vengeance on—prisoners of war, inmates of concentration camps and the people of occupied countries. Under the circumstances it seemed strange that the Germans at the front should have fought so well. Perhaps it was because fear of punishment had a double meaning there, and

the choice was not very great, anyway—summary court-martial or a Soviet bullet.

But was there anything heroic in this as they claimed so loudly? Ivan measured the heroism of a soldier with his own strict yardstick, one that few measured up to, least of all himself.

If he had, in fact, been more resolute he would not have allowed them to take him prisoner; he would have done something at the last moment that would once and for all have given him a definite past and future. He should have shot himself, that's what... For an instant he had a picture in his mind of that day and of the broad bayonet, black with smoke from the shots that had been fired, on to which he had stumbled as he dashed away from the tank. He could remember the bayonet and the jackboot with the canvas tag sticking out of the top; and he remembered the hand grenade with the long handle. Then the excruciating pain in his side deadened everything else. An unshaven German, looking terrible in his coating of dust, shouted something; at his feet lay the bloody corpse of Abdurrakhmanov, a tank rattled by and for a second he lost control. That second cost him dear, traces of it remained on body and soul for ever.

In the regiment he had been just like all the rest; he had three times been cited in orders, had two For Valour medals and did not think he was capable of anything greater. It was only as a prisoner, when there had been no one to inspire him to heroic deeds or to award him, when the slightest disobedience would cost him his life—it was only then that the spirit of non-submission, boldness and stubbornness came to the surface. There he learnt the real nature of fascism and it was then, apparently, that he realised that death was not the worst of the misfortunes of war.

"You give bread?" Giulia's voice reached him suddenly from behind. Ivan shuddered from the suddenness of it, but was glad and spun round to look at her.

"You give bread?" Giulia's face was still tense as she asked that question. "We no go Trieste? *Alles finita?* Eh?"

"Of course not!" Ivan smiled at her. "I only gave him a crust."

She frowned and looked intently at him. Then he showed her what was left of the loaf.

"Only a crust, understand?"

Giulia was trying to overcome some internal difficulty, and did not answer; her forehead, however, gradually became smooth again as the frown disappeared.

"No go Trieste? Yes? No?"

"Of course we're going. What makes you think we're not?"

Her face showed the struggle going on inside her, she plucked at the breast of her jacket, deciding something for herself and suddenly dropped to the ground beside him. She pulled up her knees, rest-

ed her arms on them and hid her face in her hands. He sat beside her, ready to help her, but she had pulled herself together and soon threw back her head, shaking off her despondency.

"*Russo!* You good man, good," she said, pressing his hand. "You no belong Vlasov. *Russo* good, Giulia bad."

"What's this for?" Ivan objected softly. "Why? Don't..."

Giulia was not listening. She seemed to have understood something, and now spoke in apologetic tones.

"Ivan no angry with Giulia?" she asked.

"No, everything's all right."

Sitting on the ground beside her he took her soft little hand carefully in his. She did not draw it back.

"Ivan not angry," she said; for the first time she looked into his eyes. "Ivan not angry with Giulia. Ivan know what's right. Giulia not know truth..."

"All right, don't get so upset..."

"Giulia very much respect Ivan, Giulia love Ivan," she said. His hand, the one that held hers, trembled very slightly. To change the subject he asked her whether she was thirsty.

"Water? Drink, eh?"

She heaved a deep sigh and did not immediately answer; she looked at him and her wide-open eyes had contrition and tenderness in them.

"What? Oh, *acqua!*"

"Yes, water. I think there's a stream over there. Come on!"

He sprang quickly to his feet, she also got up, seized his arm above the elbow and rubbed her cheek against him. With his free hand he stroked her hair, but feeling that Giulia was tensed up internally he hastily dropped it.

They walked slowly towards the edge of the field.

19

The stream was shallow but very fast, a wide stretch of ice-cold water that dashed madly over stones that churned it into yellow foam and hurled it against the wet stones of the shore. At one bend the stream had washed a broad expanse of gravel clean of grass and earth. Ivan and Giulia came up to the water's edge here and drank their fill, using their hands as cups. The girl went back to the bank but Ivan rolled his torn trousers up above the knee and went into deeper water. The cold was so intense that his legs hurt, the swift stream threatened to knock him off his feet, but he badly wanted to wash because the sweat was eating into his face. He rubbed his prickly, bewhiskered cheeks and hoped to see his reflection in the water, but the rushing water would not allow him

to. "I must look like a tramp," he thought and, disturbed by the idea, looked up at Giulia.

"Am I awful to look at unshaven?" he asked the girl. She did not answer him but sat wrapped in thought staring at a point on the bank. "Am I terrible to look at, I'm asking you? I'm like an old man, eh?"

She gave a start, listened to him, trying to understand what he was saying; she guessed his meaning when she saw him rubbing his whiskers.

"Ivan good, Ivan very *wunderschön.*"

Ivan washed himself and wondered whether something had not happened to the girl—she was obviously alarmed at something, she was worrying about something, for she had never shown such deep concentration even when they were under the very eyes of the Germans. Such deep contemplation was not part of her nature, and this meant that he, Ivan, had caused her pain. He, on the contrary, had got rid of all his former worries and on that broad green field was allowing his soul to rest. He liked being with her and he wanted to dispel her doubts, he wanted her to be the former Giulia, sincere, happy and trusting. Perhaps he should caress her, calm her—but there was a line between them which Ivan could not cross, much as he wanted to. There was something boyishly shy in him that urged him towards the girl but he restrained himself, wavered, procrastinated.

When he had finished washing he took water in his cupped hands and threw it from a distance at Giulia; the girl shuddered, looked at him, puzzled, and then burst out laughing. He laughed, too, an unusual laugh for him that spread across his broad bearded face.

"Scare you?"

"No."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"How—nothing?"

"Nothing," she said, submissively. "Ivan nothing, Giulia nothing."

Although her heart was still heavy she responded easily to his jokes and through the narrow slits of her half-closed eyes she watched him stride towards the grass, leaving wet footprints in the gravel.

"It didn't take you long to learn some Russian," he said, remembering their recent conversation. "You must have been clever at school."

"I was a *Wunderkind,*" she said jokingly and then, suddenly, she clapped her hands, "*Santa Madonna—sangue,* blood!"

"What?"

"*Sangue,* blood, blood!"

He looked down. A narrow stream of blood ran down his wet leg from the knee—the wound had opened. It was nothing serious—until then he had not found time to look at it, but now, as he sat beside the girl, he rolled his trouser-leg up higher and saw that the dog had scratched him badly above the knee and the wound had begun to bleed when the water wetted it. Giulia leaned over him fearfully, and groaned although it was not very much of a cut.

"Oh, Ivan, Ivan! Hurt very much? O, *Madonna!* Where you get hurt?"

"Oh, it was that dog," he said, laughing, "it scratched me while I was strangling it."

"*Santa Madonna!* A dog!"

With skilled, competent fingers she began to feel his leg and to wipe away the stale, dried blood and the fresh, too. He lay back on his elbows, sensing the tenderness in her touch; he was calm and peaceful at heart. True the wound had opened and was bleeding and although it was not very painful, it had to be bandaged... Giulia got up on to her knees.

"Look at mountains, look that way," she ordered.

He understood that she wanted him to turn away and he obeyed her. She immediately tore something she was wearing and when he turned back she was holding something clean and white in her hands.

"*Medicamento...* Need *medicamento,*" she said, about to begin bandaging the wound.

"What medicine? It'll heal by itself."

"No. That illness very bad."

"It's not illness, it's a wound, a wound."

"A wound, very bad wound."

He looked round in the grass and then plucked some leaves from a plant that looked like a plantain.

"Here's your *medicamento.* Mother always used these."

"That? That *plantago major,* that not *medicamento,*" she said, and took the leaves out of his hand. He immediately snatched them back.

"What are you talking about? It's a plantain. Don't you know how it heals wounds?"

"No plantain. It's *plantago major* in Latin."

"You know Latin, too?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Giulia know much, very much Latin. Giulia study botany."

He had learned some botany himself, a long time ago, but he did not remember anything and, relying more on folk medicine, applied the leaves to the swelling wound. Giulia shook her head in

protest but nevertheless began to bandage his leg. For the first time since they met Ivan felt her superior to him—she was obviously better educated than he was, and this increased his respect for her. The wound did not bother Ivan very much, he was more interested in flowers the names of which he did not know. He stretched out his hand and plucked a flower that looked like an ordinary field camomile.

"What's this called?"

She was binding his leg deftly, but stopped to glance quickly at the flower.

"*Pyrethrum roseum.*"

"Nothing like what we call it—*romashka* in Russian."

He plucked another flower, a little blue thing that looked like a washed-out cornflower.

"And this?"

"That? That's a *primula auriculata.*"

"And this?"

"*Gentiana pyrenaica,*" she said as she took two little blue bells on a hard stalk from him.

"You know everything. Smart kid. Only you know it in Latin..."

Meanwhile, Giulia bound up the wound somehow and a brown patch appeared on the outside and began to spread.

"You lie down. Keep quiet," she demanded.

With a sort of careless condescension towards her care for him he obeyed her; he lay down on the grass, his leg stretched out, and turned his face to the girl. She tucked her legs up under her and placed a hand on his leg, hot from the sun.

"*Russo* good man, good," she said, stroking his leg carefully.

"You say I'm a good man but you don't believe it. You called me a Vlasov man," he answered, remembering their recent tiff. She sighed.

"No Vlasov man," she said understandingly. "Giulia believe Ivan. Ivan know truth, Giulia not understand truth."

Ivan looked penetratingly into her saddened eyes.

"What did he tell you, that Vlasov soldier? Where did you hear him?"

"I hear him in camp," Giulia answered readily. "Vlasov man say that people hungry in Russian *kolkhoz,* he say *kolkhoz* very bad."

"Fine sort of swine he was," Ivan laughed. "Must have been a *kulak.* Of course we didn't all live the same, some better, some worse, it wasn't a paradise. I didn't want to talk to you about it but..."

"You talk, Ivan, talk. Tell me," Giulia insisted.

He pulled up a camomile from under his arm. "Well, the harvest

failed sometimes. It's true there were different sorts of collective farms. The land isn't the same everywhere, either. Where I lived, for instance, it was all stones. And swamps, too. Everything would have been done in time, of course, and we would eventually have got down to the land problem. D'you know how many swamps have been drained? They started using tractors in our parts and all sorts of machines. Peasants got a lot of help. Work was well under way. But then the war came..."

Giulia moved closer to him.

"Ivan say something about Siberia. Giulia think Ivan joking."

"No, I wasn't. There was Siberia, too. They sent the *kulaks* away—those who were prosperous, like German *Bauer.* And all kinds of enemies were arrested. There were four of them in our village of Tereshki."

"Enemies? Why enemies?"

"They stood up for the bourgeoisie. They tried to give the *kolkhoz* cows glanders—there's a disease called that—they wanted to infect them all."

"Oi, that very bad man."

"Yes, that's what I heard. Perhaps they were not all bad, not all four. But they gave them ten years each all the same. And sent them to a camp in Siberia."

"That true, Ivan?"

"What did you think?"

Lying on his side he concentrated on the business of pulling petals off the camomile.

"Ivan love his country?" asked Giulia after a short pause. "Byelorussia? Siberia? Your good people?"

"Who else should I love? It's true people differ—we have good and bad. I think there are more good than bad. When my father died and the cow gave no more milk, we had a hard time. Lived on potatoes. One of the village women would bring us something, then another would. Our neighbour Opanas brought us firewood in winter. That was while I was growing up. They were sorry for the widow. They were good people. There were bad people, too. In 'thirty-seven they told tales about our schoolmaster, Anatoli Yevgenyevich, and he was arrested. He was honest—clever, too. A good man. Argued with the *kolkhoz* chairman about things that were wrong. He wanted to help the people. And some son-of-a-bitch informed against him, said he was against the government. He got ten years, too. It was a mistake, of course."

"Why people no defend good teacher?"

"They did. The whole village signed the petition. But..."

Ivan did not finish. The unwished-for memories filled his head with joyless thoughts and he lay there biting the stem of his cam-

omile. Giulia, worried and attentive, softly stroked the hot bandaged knee.

"Everything happened. The old way of life was destroyed, everything was made anew, it wasn't easy. It cost blood. And still there's nothing like your mother country. Hard times are soon forgotten, it's the good times that are remembered more. We had our difficulties, there wasn't enough of everything, but we lived in peace. That was the main thing. I think like this–let everything come back as it was, only without any wars. We'd get over everything. We'd overcome everything, we'd be more just..."

"*Russo fenomeno. Paradosso.* Amazing!" exclaimed Giulia, heatedly. Ivan spat out the stalk he was chewing.

"What is there amazing in it? Struggle. We had to build up our defences, our army."

"Oh, *Armata Rossa* will win!" agreed Giulia, enthusiastically.

"So you see what strength we built up. And after the war if we use that strength in the economy ... oho!.."

"Giulia hear much about Russia. Russia big strength." She stopped as if remembering something and smiled sadly. "Because Giulia think this way she run away from father. In Roma father make big jubilee for his firm. Many guests, one of them S.S. officer. He been Russia and say Russia very bad, very poor, no culture. And Giulia she say that not true, Russia better than Germany. Officer he say: 'Fräulein Communist?' And Giulia she say 'no Communist, truth.' Father he hit Giulia, slap me, and Giulia run away from Roma to Mario in Napoli. Mario was Communist. Giulia always think *Russo* good. Ivan run away from camp, Giulia run to Ivan. *Russo* Ivan hero."

"I'm no hero, I'm a simple soldier," protested Ivan.

"Not simple soldier! Russian soldier, hero! Most bravest, most strongest, most..." she said excitedly, picking out the Russian words she knew. Her whole tone was proof of the profound faith she had in the correctness of the idea that she would not under any circumstances retreat from. "We see your hero in camp. We hear about your hero on Eastern Front. We think your *Vaterland* strongest, most just, most..."

"It is the most just," said Ivan. "I learned to drive a tractor and didn't have to pay. I went to college, studied mechanics. And we have so many teachers now, even from among the peasants."

Until then she had been frowning, but now she raised her eyebrows and for the first time since their tiff the laughter again sparkled in her eyes.

"Amazing! Giulia love *Russo. Russo anomalia, fenomenale.* Giulia always like *anomalia, fenomenale.* Ivan *fenomeno, anomalia.* Ivan *Russo* Communist, Ivan save *Rußland,* save bourgeois monarchy *Italiano,* save Giulia..."

"To begin with I'm not a Communist, I haven't reached that stage. And secondly—what about it? All the Soviet Union saved Italy, and France, and Greece... And plenty of others. Even though they are bourgeois. Who could have stopped Hitler if we hadn't? "

"*Sí, sí*, that's true..."

With a secret smile playing on her lips she stroked his leg and then his bare side. Ivan cringed bashfully as he felt the unaccustomed touch of her gentle hands; suddenly she bent down and touched the bayonet wound scar in his side with her lips. He shuddered as if he had been wounded in the same place a second time and threw out his arm to protect himself from her unexpected caresses but she caught his arm, pressed it to the ground and in an uncontrollable burst of enthusiasm began kissing all his scars, the scar on his shoulder from a shell splinter, the bullet wound in his arm above the elbow, and bayonet wound and then, lower down, the bandaged knee. Flabbergasted at her passionate outburst, Ivan lay motionless and his heart was filled with tenderness as she kissed him again and again. The line between them proved to be so fine that it was becoming impossible to balance on it. Not knowing whether it was right or wrong but surrendering to the power of the unknown that swept over him, he raised himself on one elbow, threw the other arm round her shoulders, pressed her gently to him, closed his eyes and reached for her strangely resilient, hot lips.

He then dropped back on to the grass, spread his arms out and laughed, but would not risk opening his eyes. When he did at last open them he saw a sunny halo of tangled hair in the middle of which was Giulia, her mouth slightly open showing her gleaming white teeth. For a second she seemed to be choking, trying to say something but unable to speak—she could only open her big eyes and in them there was amazement and ecstasy that was bursting to find an outlet. She pressed herself against him, put her arms round his neck and whispered to his face, heatedly, loyally,

"Ivan! *Amico!*"

20

Something left unsaid, something of no great importance that had kept them apart all the time, had been overcome, had been actually lived through happily and almost momentarily. The questions that had until then tormented Giulia seemed to have been separated from the main thing and relegated to the background; from that moment nothing was left for either of them but the spicy aroma of the earth, the intoxication of the poppy field, the sheen of the high, clear sky. There among the wild, primeval

tangle of mountains, a hair's breadth from death, something new was born, something unknown, mysterious, secret and imperative, something that lived, hungered, intimidated and beckoned...

Lying on the grass Ivan stroked again and again her narrow back, hot from the sun, and she, pressed against his chest, rubbed her burning cheek on the scar of the splinter wound in his shoulder. Her lips kept all the time whispering something incomprehensible, but Ivan understood everything. He laughed happily and felt he was floating weightless in the air; the sky above was spinning drunkenly, the earth below was a gigantic misshapen bowl that swayed and leaned over sideways, ready at any moment to tip over—and it was all sweet and intimidating and intoxicating.

Time stood still for him, the danger had disappeared; her huge black eyes were burning hot right in front of his face. Those eyes now showed nothing of her worry, her suffering, of her mischievousness—nothing but a call to him, powerful in its silence; Ivan had felt something similar on the edge of a precipice that had always frightened him and attracted him at the same time. He had no power to resist the call, and he did not know whether he should; his lips again sought her moist mouth and strong teeth, he pulled her towards him with both hands and held her fast. The silence was almost absolute, and out of that silence came the gurgling of the mountain stream that seemed to flow majestically from nowhere into eternity. He wanted to disappear, to dissolve in her fluttering embrace, to be carried away to eternity by the stream, to draw strength from the earth and to become part of the generous, calm, gentle might of the earth...

The earth kept swaying, the sky whirled round and round, and through his half-open eyelids right close to him he saw her tender round cheek covered with down that turned gold in the sunshine; her tiny shell of an ear, lit up from behind, was burning rosy-red. Instinctively, he reached for the lobe of that tiny ear with its scarcely noticeable trace of an earring, and bit it gently—Giulia jerked back swiftly and let out a little scream—he let go her ear and felt her thin, swift moving hands under his shoulders.

A strange, unknown voice within him, apparently aroused by her plaintive little cry, answered with equal embarrassment—a voice that wavered, protested, was afraid of something. Ivan, however, tried not to hear that voice, to smother its protest—he did not want to know anything else, the mountain stream was noisily surging and splashing in his consciousness, the earth was humming to its very depths and the insistent, imperative passion in his soul echoed it in a burst of sound...

The earth fed him her ancient nectar, a wave of tremendous strength swept through his whole body. He put his arms gently round the girl and earth and sky changed places. Nothing else now

mattered—she was in his arms. She—the mysterious and unknown, buried in the bright blaze of the poppies, quietened, tiny and weakened, yet mistress of the earth, of herself and of him...

Somewhere quite close under them, apparently in the depths of the earth, the relentless stream gurgled, bubbled and hastened onward, calling to them, urging them on to distant parts unknown. Giulia struggled in his arms, words came and went on her wide-open lips—strange words, yet familiar and understandable.

What meaning had words at that moment?

And the bowels of the earth, the mountains, and the mighty anthem of all the earth's streams became silent by mutual agreement and gave their blessing to the great secret of life.

21

He awoke, afraid that he had fallen asleep and allowed something unusually great and joyful escape him. He lifted his head and saw Giulia, and then he smiled because his fear had been unfounded—nothing had disappeared, nothing had been lost, and it was not even a dream as he had at first thought.

For the first time in many years reality proved happier than the happiest dream.

Giulia was lying curled up, her head resting on an arm stretched out in the grass. But her breathing was not even like that of a person asleep—at times it seemed to die away as though she were listening to something, and she would sigh spasmodically in her sleep. Her half-open lips were moving all the time, revealing her sharp little teeth; at first he thought she was whispering something, but no words came and her lips, cheeks and eyebrows trembled, apparently as they followed the progress of her dreams. Whatever she was experiencing in her sleep, it was all tenderness—the dreams must have been good, for a quiet, trusting smile appeared from time to time on her lips.

They spent a long time in that field, the sun climbed down from the heavens and hid behind the darkening spires of the mountains. The field that had been so triumphantly brilliant by day looked poor and almost unprepossessing as the darkness thickened. The distant scene was soon wrapped in mist, a whitish haze rose over the distant grey range, the valley was completely drowned in gloom. The Bear Range had by then lost its wooded foothills and seemed to be melting as it floated in a grey sea of mist. Only the highest peaks still gleamed brightly, lit up by the invisible sun. This was the last, farewell light of an unusual and unexpected day that had come like an award. A single sad star came out and burned quietly and lonely far away in the distance.

He turned again to Giulia–they had to get up and set out on their journey, but she was sleeping so sweetly and looked so helpless and weak that he did not dare disturb her. He began to peer into her face, as if he were seeing it for the first time. After everything that had happened between them, every smile in her sleep, every little grimace she made, acquired a special significance and he wanted to look at her endlessly trying to read the inner secrets of a soul so dear to him. What he discovered in her was unexpected, pure and joyous, and he almost choked on this, his first intoxication. It is true that the dizziness was wearing off, but the sense of happiness grew stronger and he remained perfectly still, looking at that tiny human miracle as at an impenetrable mystery, the miracle that had revealed itself to him so happily and so late in life.

She slept on and on, pressed to the strong breast of mother earth; her delicate nostrils trembled slightly, and a tiny ladybird crawled up her sleeve, left the striped folds of the jacket to climb on to the hill of the girl's shoulder, spread its wings to fly but did not take off–it kept crawling further. Ivan flicked the insect away carefully, and with careful fingers pulled into place the tape with the cross that Giulia wore round her neck. She did not wake up, she only breathed more deeply, then he carefully pulled the jacket down on her back, where it had ridden up, and smiled as he did so. Who could have believed that in two days she would have become everything for him, that she would win his heart completely in what seemed to be the most inappropriate circumstances. How could he have imagined that during his fourth escape, when he was trying to save himself from death, he would suddenly meet his first love? How everything was mixed up in this world! Who on earth could tell who did the mixing–men or God. But someone must have, or how could it have happened that as a prisoner of war, within an inch of death, he should have met a strange, foreign girl, a girl from another world who had suddenly become the most important and dearest thing in his life.

Nevertheless, they had to get on their way. There was no time for resting, he would have to wake Giulia, he thought, but instead he lay down beside her, carefully, so as not to disturb her sleep. Tenderness towards the girl filled his whole being; he pushed aside a poppy stem that was hanging low over her head, and brushed away a hovering white moth that seemed intent to settling on her hair. Let her sleep a little longer, he thought, making himself more comfortable. A little longer–and then we'll have to set out. They had to go downhill, down into the valley...

The wide Bear Range was reflecting the last rays of light in the calm evening sky high above the tangled mountain mass. The grey shadow of night crawled higher and higher up the slope and the rosy glint on the peaks grew smaller and smaller. Soon the light

went out altogether and the mountain range bowed its head and sank out of sight; grey twilight spread over the whole countryside and the first stars appeared in a sky that was still light. Ivan, however, did not see them–as he fell asleep his last thought was of the need to get moving.

It was Giulia who woke him up, she tossed about in her sleep from the cold and then pressed closer to him; through his sleep Ivan felt her presence and woke up. She seized his arm and heatedly whispered strange, unfamiliar words in his ear, but by now he knew the meaning of those words. He put his arms round her and again their lips met...

It was quite dark and cold. The nearer mountains rose up in a black mass that covered half the sky and high over them an occasional star twinkled; the wind had died down completely, not even the poppies were nodding, the only sound came from the brook that gurgled on and on. The fragrant herbs of that field were so powerfully aromatic at night that they made one feel drunk. The earth, the mountains and the sky dozed in the darkness, and Ivan sat up, bent over the girl, looked long into a face that was different now from what it had been during the day–as secret as the night and just a little bit wary. The dark pupils gleamed in her big eyes and several little stars burned in their depths. Unclear nocturnal shadows flitted across her face, and her hands even at night retained their trembling gentleness and continued stroking and fondling his shoulders, neck and head.

"Giulia!" he called, pressing her close to him.

"Ivanio!" she responded submissively, softly, gently and devotedly.

"You're not angry with me?"

"No, Ivanio."

"And if I leave you?"

"No, *amico,* Ivan no leave me, Ivan *Russo,* Ivan good, kind *Russo.*"

Hurriedly but firmly, with a strength that surprised him, she pressed him to her and laughed softly.

"Ivan *marito! Signor Zangarini non è marito, Mario non è marito. Russo Ivan–marito!*"

He was content, he even felt a secret pride in his heart.

"Are you glad? You won't be sorry that Ivan–*marito*?"

She raised her eyes with their beautiful lashes that were in the shadow of his head as he bent over her, and the stars in her pupils trembled and jumped up and down.

"Ivan good, Ivan good *marito.* We have little *figlio.* How you say that?"

"Child, I suppose."

"No, not child, no–how you say little *Russo*?"

"Son," he guessed, a little puzzled.

"Yes, son. That's good, a little, little son. We call him Ivan, eh?"

"Ivan? Yes, we can call him Ivan," he agreed, and he looked over her head at the black mountain mass and sighed. She, too, lay quiet, thinking about something; for a minute neither spoke, each was busy with his own thoughts. The mountains lay peacefully all round them, an occasional star winked faintly in the sky and the poppy field was gradually covered by a black pall. It was very quiet, only the brook babbled steadily on, but did not break the silence—Ivan imagined there were only the three of them in the world—he, Giulia and the brook. Her last words, however, had driven the smile from his face, all lightheartedness disappeared for he had come up against something difficult and serious in his own person as he discovered still another complication in their already far from simple relations. Giulia, on the contrary, had thought something out and again gave a little shiver of joy and hungrily accepted his embraces.

"Ivanio, Ivanio, how good it is, how good to have *figlio*! Son, little son!"

Then she unclasped her hands, turned with her face downwards, the stars disappeared from her eyes, her face became a light grey patch in which her eyes gleamed faintly. Her brief spell of exultation gave way to alarm.

"Ivanio, where we shall live?" She paused to think. "Not in Roma. Father in Roma, father very *böse*. Trieste?"

"Why try to guess in advance?" he asked.

"Oh!" she exlcaimed suddenly. "Giulia know. We live Byelorussia. Tereshki village, very near two lakes... Eh?"

"Perhaps, why..."

Then she seemed to remember something and became more wary.

"Tereshki—*kolkhoz*?"

"Yes, Giulia, it's a *kolkhoz*. So what?"

"Ivanio. *Kolkhoz* bad?"

"Why bad? The *kolkhoz* is good."

With his huge hand he ruffled her thick stiff hair, and she wriggled out of his grasp and smoothed her hair.

"Giulia grow long pretty hair. Long hair beautiful, eh?"

"Yes," he agreed. "It's beautiful."

She was quiet for some time and then returned to the former subject.

"Ivanio have farm, plantation, and Giulia, she have villa. And we grow many, many poppies, like this field."

"Yes, yes," Ivan agreed, although he was thinking of something else. His leg had become very painful, the bandage ought to be changed, but he did not want to cause the girl more trouble.

He stretched out his leg and made it more comfortable on the grass, listening all the time absent-mindedly to Giulia chattering incessantly beside him.

"We going have very much *fortuna.* I want *fortuna,* we must have *fortuna,* eh, Ivanio?"

"Yes, yes."

Sleep again overtook Giulia, her voice became softer, her thoughts tangled, and soon she stopped talking. He stroked her shoulder gently—he had to let her sleep, there was not much of the night left, anyway, the first and probably the last night of their happiness. Tomorrow they must go on. Only who knew what tomorrow held in store for them.

He stared for a long while at the sky—face to face with the universe, with the hundreds of stars, some big, some scarcely perceptible, with the silvery path of the Milky Way spread across the whole sky—and a sense of alarm deadened the joy that was in his soul.

During the war years he had grown unaccustomed to the happiness that is a natural necessity to man. Where was he to seek happiness when he had had to devote himself wholly to just surviving, to avoiding annihilation. The time would come, of course, when mankind would destroy fascism and people would know the great joy of brotherhood, freedom, love without bounds and without prohibitions—only he and Giulia were hardly fated to live that long. A sweet, tender-hearted girl whose dreams carried her to great heights but who had no idea of what awaited them on the way to Trieste. They had got out of the prison camp, they had learned the meaning of love in this astounding world of flowers, and she decided that all danger was behind them. If only it were! He had only to think a little to realise what trials lay ahead of them— busy roads in the valley, stormy mountain rivers, human habitations, and German posts, dogs... And added to all this the huge, impassable snow-bound mountain range! How could they possibly cross it—practically naked, barefoot and starving?

That which awaited them in the next few days was in itself enough to make anyone in their position stop and think. And what then? What awaited them in the event of their getting away was something he even loathed to concentrate on. Lord! How untimely their meeting on that mountain path had been, and their love too.

Why? Why does a man not have even the faintest hope of that happiness for which he is born on this earth and for which he strives throughout his life? Why, indeed, should she not go to his quiet little Tereshki with its two blue lakes if she wanted to, since he obviously loved her more than he could love any other girl? She would make the best wife in the world, of course.

How wonderful it would be to bring that merry black-eyed girl to his village. Would not the villagers love her and would she

not love them as much? What did it matter that they were not too well educated, perhaps somewhat lacking in culture–they were sincere, kind-hearted, compassionate in times of sorrow and generous in times of joy–why should she not love such people?

He could not imagine parting with her. He would remain with her as long as he lived, and then–what the hell! Let death come! He was not afraid of death, he could fight for himself, the more so now that he was responsible for two lives. Let them try and take her away from him. She was lying on her side, her knees drawn up to her stomach, and was sleeping peacefully. He stood up, looked round, and then sat down again beside her, frowning and angry, probably because he badly wanted to eat, but more likely because his leg was painful. The calf seemed to be swelling, the bandage was squeezing it. Ivan loosened it a bit and felt his leg–it was burning hot and he was beginning to shiver. He had to pick up the hated striped jacket and wrap it round him, but now it did not warm him very much. He sat still for a minute listening to himself. "That's all I need, to get sick–what'll happen if I do? No, no, I mustn't," he said to encourage himself. "Hold on! Keep going whatever happens!"

Something in Ivan had changed. He felt it, and alarm was seeping into his consciousness like water into a leaky boat. It was a good thing Giulia did not suspect anything and slept peacefully among the poppies. He sat down beside her, pushed his bare feet under the leather jacket that covered her, and stared into the night. Soon he felt sleepy, tiredness was taking hold of him. But she was sleeping trustingly beside him and Ivan had to sit there watching over her sleep.

At dawn he could keep awake no longer and without realizing it dozed off with his head resting on his knees.

22

His sense of uneasiness had died away as he slept, but then alarm suddenly jerked him awake; Ivan heard someone shouting incomprehensible words not far away.

"*Wo bist du, Russe? Sie wollen dir Brot geben, viel Brot.*"*

It was gradually growing lighter although the sun had not yet appeared; the whole district looked grey and unpleasant. A cloud rolled across their field and the mountains were invisible. Ragged wisps of mist kept creeping along the mountain slope, catching on the dew-laden heads of the poppies. Ivan pulled the leather jacket from Giulia's legs; she jumped to her feet and said something

*Where are you, Russian? They want to give you bread, much bread. (Germ.)–*Tr.*

in a scared voice while he, kneeling in the grass, stared fixedly in the direction from which the shout had come. Ivan soon guessed that it was the madman, but at the same time he guessed that he was not alone, that there were others with him. And sure enough, before he had managed to make out anything in the mist, he heard an angry stifled shout.

"*Halt's Maul!*"*

Giulia realised what had happened and ran to Ivan. She hung on to the sleeve of his jacket and looked downhill to where she imagined some living shadows had appeared. Ivan seized her by the hand and, bending low, ran to the stream. He held the leather jacket in his other hand but the clogs remained lying among the poppies.

They ran silently uphill along the bank of the stream.

Ivan kept Giulia's fingers firmly grasped in his hand; she was scarcely able to keep up with him and kept looking back in bewilderment. He tried to find a place where they could ford the stream—on the other side they could hide among the rocks and dense thickets of rhododendrons. The stream, however, came racing downhill at such pace that to jump into it would have been sheer suicide.

"Thank God for the cloud—it's a good job it's there!" This comforting thought kept running through his mind. The fast-moving rags of mist kept them hidden for the time being. "That bloody madman—why didn't I kill him? All those bastards are as bad as one another!" thought Ivan in despair, and he dragged Giulia ruthlessly uphill. They had already passed the bend in the stream, had climbed up the bank which was high here—further on there was only open country. The stream raged over the boulders with tremendous force and they obviously had to give up all idea of crossing to the other side. Before going out into the open grassland, Ivan, breathing heavily, dropped to his knees and looked back—the mist was growing noticeably thinner, the boulders among the poppies were becoming visible and he could see the stone outcrop on which he had awaited Giulia the day before. Then some nazi soldiers appeared through the mist; they spread out in a short line and were approaching the place where Ivan and Giulia had spent the night.

Ivan glanced at Giulia—her still sleepy face expressed alarm and extreme fatigue. "If only she can stick it out! If only she can stick it out!" Ivan fervently hoped she could. Now only their legs could save them and, after a brief rest to catch their breath, he again seized her by the hand. She put all she had into the running and she did not lag behind.

They climbed panting to the highest part of the grassland, their

*Hold your tongue! (Germ.)—*Tr.*

legs wet to the knees from the dew. Ivan was limping worse and worse all the time; his right leg had become strangely heavy, as though it were not his own–at first he thought that he had lain on it in his sleep. But it did not pass, the tendons under his knee were paining him and the knee was swollen. Giulia soon noticed how badly he was limping and pulled at his arm.

"Ivanio–your leg?"

He dragged his leg over the grass, trying to tread as carefully as possible. Giulia looked back and then ran in front of him and seized hold of his trouser-leg intending to examine the wound.

"Must bandage it, eh? I make little bandage."

He pushed her hand resolutely away.

"I don't need anything. Come on, hurry up!"

"It hurt, eh? Hurt?" she asked with alarm in her big eyes. She looked at him solicitously; under her striped jacket her heart was beating wildly from fatigue. She raised her eyebrows and they were trembling.

"Never mind..."

He suppressed the pain and hobbled on; the girl's hand slipped from his fingers and he did not grasp it again–she ran after him, looking back every minute.

"Ivanio, *amico,* we going to live? Tell me!" She asked that question with a despair that broke his heart.

Ivan looked at her, not knowing what to answer, and saw so much entreaty and hope in her look that he hurried to comfort her.

"Of course we shall. Move quicker, though."

"Ivanio, I quick... I quick... I good..."

"All right, come on..."

They had already reached the upper boundary of the grassland. Somewhere here the path they had come down in the night began among the boulders; they could probably hide among the rocks. The cloud, however, had by this time rolled away from the poppy field, the mist was growing thinner as they watched it and in the breaks between it clumps of poppies and outcrops of stone were visible; the breaks in the mist were rapidly spreading. "Hell, we've got to get away! Surely they won't see us? They can't!" Ivan tried to calm himself and climbed higher and higher. He had had some experience of escapes from camps, could weigh up the situation in all its intricacy and realised that once the Germans spotted them they would never let them go.

There was still no path, however, and they were climbing all the time up the grassy slope. It was a good thing it was not too steep–the only thing that bothered them was the low growths of rhododendrons that pricked their feet badly. Giulia did not hold him up–he need not have worried on that account. She went just slightly ahead of him, stepping on her bare, bleeding feet, and

when she glanced back at him he saw in her face a determination to avoid disaster such as he had not seen all the time since they had left the camp. It seemed that neither the stones nor her fatigue bothered her any more; she took no notice of the thorns and the rough rocks—she was a tigress fighting fiercely for her life.

"Ivanio, soon, soon..."

Now she was hurrying him along! When Ivan realized this he clenched his teeth—he was feeling worse. His leg had grown heavier than ever, the knee was swollen—he pulled up his trouser-leg to glance at it and lowered it again immediately—the knee was like a log, swollen and blue. "What a hell of a mess! Must be blood-poisoning!"

To their great misfortune the last rags of the mist floated away and opened up the whole field, red with poppies, to their view. Immediately there appeared from out of the mist one, two, three figures of the Germans, dark like stone statues. There were about eight of them, dragging tiredly across the field, crushing the flowers and scanning warily the mountain slopes.

Now there was no use hiding...

Ivan sat down and threw the leather jacket to the ground; Giulia stood with her head bowed beside him, not knowing what to do—they were so tired that for a few seconds they could not utter a word and looked at their pursuers in silence. The Germans began shouting, one of them put out his hand and pointed to them; they could hear a hoarse word of command. In the middle of the line there was a man in a striped jacket, his hands seemed to be fastened behind him and he had an escort of two who pushed him in the back whenever he stopped. It was the madman.

The Germans began to move faster and then ran, shouting, uphill.

"All right," said Ivan. "Only don't you be afraid. Don't be afraid. Let 'em come!"

So that the leather jacket would not hamper him he put it on and took the pistol out of the pocket. Giulia maintained a gloomy silence, her brows were drawn together and there was a mark of grim determination on her face. He glanced at the girl but saw no fear in her eyes; she had regained her breath and the alarm he had formerly seen had now turned into the sorrow of the doomed.

"Come on! Let them run, let 'em sweat!"

"They going *schießen!*" asked Giulia in surprise as if she had only just realised what threatened them.

"Too far to shoot. Let 'em shoot if they've got cartridges to waste."

The Germans, in fact, were not firing yet, they merely kept shouting "*Halt!*" as the fugitives hurried higher and higher to

where there were tangled thickets of low bushes. Once Giulia had recovered from her first alarm she again became active, quick, attentive, and, it seemed, ready for anything.

"Let them *schießen!* Giulia not afraid. Let them *schießen,*" said the girl.

Looking back all the time, she ran to Ivan and took him by the hand. He pressed her cold fingers gratefully and did not let them go.

"Ivanio, if S.S. men *schießen,* we *schießen,* too, eh? We no go camp, eh?"

He frowned and looked at her thoughtfully.

"Of course. Only don't you be afraid."

"I not afraid. *Russo* Ivan no afraid, Giulia no afraid."

He was not afraid. He had gone through too much in the course of the war to feel any more fear. As soon as the Germans discovered them he felt a strange relief and pulled himself together—there was no further need for cunning, now God grant him strength. And of course, there had to be Giulia by his side. A duel of agility, precision and speed had started; in trying to get away they had to husband their strength; they were not to allow the Germans within rifle-shot, they had to reach the clouds that lay motionless on the mountaintops at night and there evade their pursuers. There was no other way out for them.

23

They reached the bushes at last but did not try to hide among them—they no longer had any need of hiding place. Giulia climbed up the scree under a steep slope, showering sand and pebbles from underfoot and grasping the thorny branches with her hands; she got to the top of the pile and waited while Ivan, dragging his bad leg painfully, scrambled after her. At the steepest place, right under the edge of the cliff, he simply did not know how to get over the top, his leg caused him so much pain. The girl knelt down and held out her thin, weak hand to him. He glanced at the blue veins in her forearm and made one more attempt to climb up unaided—how could she possibly drag him up? Giulia, chattering away in her peculiar mixture of Italian, German and Russian, took him insistently under the arm and steadied him until he at last pulled his heavy body over the edge of the cliff.

"Hurry, Ivanio, hurry! S.S." she repeated time and again in tones of fear.

The Germans were actually catching up with them, the most agile of them had already passed the grassland and were clambering up the slope; the others were trying to keep up with them. The madman, his hands tied behind his back, stumbled along at the end

of the line with his escort urging him on. One of those in front saw the fugitives near the bushes and let off a burst of fire from his submachine gun. The shots were echoed by the distant ravines. Ivan looked back—the Germans, true enough, were a long way away—and then strode on, almost falling over Giulia who was lying on the slope.

"What's the matter with you?"

"No, no! They no shoot!" She jumped up and looked back with a gleam of pleasure in her eyes. Her face glowed with a savage joy. "S.S. bastards!" she shouted at the Germans in a loud indignant voice. "*Verfluchter! Schwein!*"

"All right, drop that!" said Ivan. They had to husband their strength—what sense was there in calling them names.

Giulia, however, did not want to give up without a fight-rage and the memory of all she had suffered from the Germans overcame all sound reasoning.

"Hitler *kaput*! Hitler *cretino*! Go on—*schießen!*"

The Germans fired several more bursts but the fugitives were much higher up than their pursuers and, as Ivan knew, the laws of ballistics made it almost impossible for them to hit their mark. Giulia was savagely jubilant when she realised that not a single bullet came whistling near them.

"Come on, *schießen! Schießen!* Fascisti! Briganti!"

She was flushed from running and from her excitement and her eyes gleamed with an angry black fire; her short thick hair was tousled by the wind. She had apparently exhausted her supply of swearwords and, picking up a stone from underfoot, swung her arm clumsily and threw it—it bounced from point to point, far down the hill.

Ivan was the first to begin climbing up again. The slope was becoming steeper and steeper. Damn those bushes! They were the very hell, those bushes—they would have been useful down below where it was possible to try and hide from the pursuers, but on the hill they were a nuisance, they scratched them and caught hold of their clothing. The idea of crawling through them was terrifying—their stiff, wirelike, resiny branches were so tightly interwoven. Ivan, occasionally glancing upward in alarm, was trying to pick out an easier route, but no, there was no other way. Higher up another cliff with scree awaited them and he knew they would not make it...

Giulia, however, did not see that; busy cursing the Germans, she had fallen slightly behind and was now hurrying to catch up with him. He was out of breath and sat down on the stones, his wounded leg outstretched.

"Ivanio, leg hurt?" asked Giulia from down below him.

He did not answer.

"You show me."

In silence he got up and again looked upwards at the cliff; she

too looked up at the steep incline strewn with rock debris and stopped.

"Ivanio!"

"All right. Come along."

"Ivanio!"

Her face was distorted as though from pain—she looked back and saw the Germans following quickly behind them.

"Ivanio, we soon die! No Tereshki, nothing!"

"Come on, hurry, hurry up!" he shouted sternly; there was nothing they could do but turn into the bushes. Clenching his teeth he crept into that impenetrable, low-growing thicket that even wild animals fought shy of. Hundreds of sharp needles stuck into his legs, but he paid no attention to them, trying to protect only his knee; beads of cold sweat broke out on his forehead from the pain and the exertion. Undeterred by the thorns and the stones he crawled through the thicket in an effort to get round the cliff.

"Oi, oi, oi," shouted Giulia in despair as she crawled after him now and again stumbling and falling. He did not try to comfort her nor did he urge her on—he only looked back at the cliff edge where the Germans would appear at any moment.

This time the fugitives were lucky, they had almost reached the upper edge of the thicket before the first S.S. man appeared over the top of the cliff. He was dangerous now, because the difference in height between them and the Germans was very small. As soon as the German raised his head Ivan took a hurried aim and fired his pistol.

A dull echo rolled through the mountains.

Naturally he missed—the distance was too great but the German took the precaution of ducking down behind the cliff top; a long burst of submachine-gun fire followed. Tr-r-r-r—it echoed and re-echoed farther and farther through the mountains. As soon as the echo died away the fugitives hurried on. The sudden pistol shot had frightened the Germans and for some time no one appeared over the top. Then a striped figure appeared—Giulia saw him first.

"Ivanio! *Häftling!*"

The madman crawled over the edge of the cliff, his legs spread wide apart, and stood up swaying and shouting in his disgustingly hoarse voice.

"*Russe! Russe! Halt!* Why are you running away? They want to feed you."

"*Zurück!* Get back!" shouted Ivan.

The madman cringed timidly and moved back. Then they heard the Germans shouting at him and a little later they began climbing over the edge, all of them that were there.

The situation was rapidly deteriorating. It was only a short distance to the saddle where the thicket ended, but the Germans

could shoot them down before they got there. They had to stop the Germans at all costs and try to reach the saddle. Ivan dropped to one knee and fired once, twice, three times. He then bent down and kept out of sight among the low bushes. By this time Giulia had caught him up.

"Ivanio, not all bullets, no *alles.*"

He understood what she meant and touched her thin shoulder in his desire to pacify her—he would save the last two cartridges. He expected shots in reply, but the Germans were silent as they too, spreading out, crawled into the thicket. Then Ivan jumped up and, bending down so as to keep as much under cover as possible, went limping towards the saddle at the top of the slope.

The Germans had probably made a mistake when they also crawled into the bushes following the fugitives. The bushes not only impeded their movements, they prevented them from seeing their prey and from taking aim; while the S.S. men were struggling through, Ivan and Giulia made their way forward. They expected to hear shots from behind them, but none came and, having at last left the bushes behind, they ran, panting, to the narrow saddle and almost went rolling down the far side. From there Ivan took a good look round; on one side another steep stony slope similar to that behind them rose up under low-hanging clouds; right underfoot the slope led down into a hollow, beyond which lay another low mountain fold. Here and there white clouds, like flocks of sheep, floated overhead, and beyond them a solid curtain of grey clouds hid the snow-clad mountaintops.

They were only just out of the narrow pass when Giulia dropped to her knees, crossed her arms on her breast and began whispering something quickly, very quickly.

"What are you doing? Come on, hurry up!" he shouted.

She did not answer him but whispered a few more words, while Ivan, limping badly, ran downhill. She jumped up hurriedly and caught up with him.

"*Santa Maria* will help. I ask her very much."

He was genuinely surprised.

"Drop that! No one will help you!"

Not knowing which way to turn and not having strength enough to climb higher, they set off diagonally across the slope leading to the hollow. The saddle and the cliff behind still kept them hidden from the Germans. It was much easier to run downhill, their bodies went forward of themselves, the only thing was that their knees were giving way from fatigue. Ivan was quite unable to use his leg, so badly was he limping. Giulia ran ahead of him, but did not go too far and kept looking back. It seemed that their having got away from under the very noses of the Germans had given hope to the

girl. She looked boldly back at Ivan, chattering all the time, hopefully and with inspiration.

"Ivanio, we going to live! Live, Ivanio! I very much want to live!"

"Oho," he thought. "It's a lot too soon to rejoice!" He looked back as he ran and saw the first German appear over the saddle. The man who climbed over the stones with difficulty was tall, he was wearing tight breeches, his tunic was unbuttoned to reveal a white shirt under it. He was in no hurry to fire although they were not far from him and only a little lower down. He looked at them for half a minute, standing still, and then shouted something to the others coming up behind; then he burst out laughing. He laughed for a long time and shouted something to the fugitives. Then, instead of running after them, he sat down on a boulder and took off his cap.

Giulia ran up to Ivan and pulled at his sleeve.

"Ivanio, Ivanio, look! They good Germans, they let us go, they let us go! Look!"

Ivan could not understand why they did not shoot, why they had let them go and had themselves remained in the narrow pass. One of them went away to one side and waved his submachine gun at them, shouting to them in German to run faster.

"Ivanio, Germans let us go!" exclaimed Giulia as she ran, suddenly joyfully excited. "We going to live!"

Ivan did not answer her.

What's the trick? What have they got up their sleeves? It all seemed unlikely to him and he was certain there was more to it than met the eye. The Germans had not given up the chase out of sheer kindness but more likely because they had something worse in store for the fugitives.

But what?

Ivan and Giulia ran down to the bottom of the hollow, pushed their way through the rhododendrons to its other side—a low, rounded bare slope on that side—and plodded weakly uphill again. The sandstone and the short prickly grass had badly cut their feet, but they no longer felt the cruelty of the earth. Giulia now ran ahead, now turned back again, all the time looking back at the Germans. Her joy increased as she and Ivan moved farther away from the saddle. Ivan's troubled, gloomy look, however, soon attracted her attention.

"Ivanio, why you *furioso*? Leg, eh?" she asked him in worried tones.

"It's not the leg..."

"Why? We going to live, Ivanio. We got away..."

He thought he had already guessed what was wrong. He did not answer her, but limped hurriedly up the dome-like slope that fur-

ther away seemed to be diving downwards. It hid them from the Germans–that was good, but... They came out into the open, onto a stony platform and Giulia seemed to have guessed too, for she stopped suddenly. In front of them the mountains gave way to a broad empty space over which hovered a blue haze–below them lay a gloomy nothingness from which whirling tufts of mist climbed upwards to the sky.

With hearts grown suddenly cold they ran in silence to the edge and staggered back–the slope broke off suddenly in a vertical cliff–below them was a misty abyss with occasional grey patches of last year's snow.

24

Giulia lay crying on a stone ledge some five paces from the cliff edge. He did not try to calm her or comfort her, he sat down beside her, his hands pressed against the moss-covered stones, and thought. Apparently this was the end. In front and to the right was the precipice, to the left there rose a steep, rocky mountainside as high as the clouds, and behind them, on the saddle were the Germans. It was the perfect trap–just their luck to get caught like that! It was much too sudden for Giulia and quite unbearable after the hope of salvation that had suddenly appeared; so he did not try to comfort her, he had no words for that.

Bitterly cold damp came to them from the abyss and their heated bodies began to cool very quickly; all round them, as if in gigantic funnels the wind howled among the rocks and it was cloudy and gloomy. But why did the Germans not come on, why didn't they shoot? They had all got together on the saddle, some sitting, other standing around the striped figure of the madman. Ivan peered into the distance and realized that they were amusing themselves by stabbing the *Häftling* with their lighted cigarettes–in the forehead, the neck and the back–and the *Häftling* with his hands bound was twisting like a snake between them; he spat and kicked at them, but they roared with laughter and again burnt him with their cigarettes.

"*Russe! Russe!* Help!" The whining shout of the German came to their ears.

This put Ivan on his guard–what had the swine thought of now? Why were they so merciless and inhuman to their own people and to others, to everyone? Was it only because of their meanness, really just for fun?

It seemed as if the Germans were waiting for something–only for what? Perhaps for help? Now there was nothing to fear, everything as Giulia would say, was obviously *finita.* His fourth escape

was evidently to be his last. It was a pity, however, about that tiny human miracle, that black-eyed chatterbox, with whom happiness had been so intoxicating and so shortlived. Nevertheless he was grateful to chance that had sent him the girl in the last and most memorable hours of his life. Strange as it might seem, after all that had happened, it was easier to die side by side with her than in the insatiable furnace of the crematorium.

It seemed that Giulia had cried her fill, her shoulders no longer trembled—she merely flinched now and again from the cold. He took off the leather jacket and, reaching out to the girl, carefully covered her. Giulia shook herself, made a tremendous effort, sat up and began rubbing her tear-filled eyes with her dirty, scratched fists.

"It's bad, Ivanio. Oi, oi, it's bad!"

"Never mind, don't you be afraid! I have two cartridges," he said showing her the pistol.

"Giulia no have *fortuna.* Giulia *finita,*" she said in despair.

He sat motionless on the ground, watching the Germans intently, and everything inside him was raging from sorrow and helplessness. His conscience told him that he was responsible for her fate, but what could he do? If only the precipice were a bit easier to negotiate—but there was just that ledge hanging over an abyss, and behind it still another; the bottom was out of sight and there was not even the sound of a river. Then there was his leg—how could he keep upright on that steep slope. All this, taken together, determined their inevitable end.

"*Russe!* Help! Help!" came the weak voice of the madman.

Giulia saw the Germans on the saddle, rose up on her knees and cried out brandishing her tiny little fists:

"*Fascisti! Briganti!* Swine! Come and take us!"

The Germans on the saddle were silent, but soon the wind brought from there the sound of a voice dulled by distance.

"Hi you! We're going to kill you soon!"

"Come to prison. Leave the cold mountain, come to the nice warm crematorium," said another voice.

Giulia's face again turned red from uncontrollable rage.

"*Nimm! Nimm!*" She shook her fists at them. "*Komm! Nimm uns! Ha, Sie haben Angst, eh?* You, afraid, eh?"

The Germans heard the words that reached them through the wind and one after another began yelling back indecent taunts. Giulia was beside herself with rage—she could not hold her own in such a verbal duel and could only bite her lip. Ivan took her by the shoulders and pressed her close to him—the girl's head dropped obediently on to his chest and in her hopeless despair she wept like a little child.

"Don't do that. Don't cry. It's all right." Ivan tried clumsily

to soothe her although he had difficulty in suppressing his own angry despair.

Giulia soon stopped crying and he held her in his arms for a long time, thinking gloomily how well everything had begun and how badly it was ending. He was the one that never had any luck, he must be the world's most unlucky being if he could not take advantage of such a favourable opportunity to escape.

Golodai, Yanushka and the others would have made a better job of it—they would have got to Trieste and would be already fighting with the partisans against the fascists. And there he was, stuck in those damned mountains and driven into a trap like a wolf, what's more. He should have done what he had set out to do—set off the bomb and let the others escape. But now... The worst of it was he had brought Giulia to her death, and she had believed in him, she had followed him and loved him... And that was how he had justified the hopes she had in him!

He pressed her tear-stained face to his breast and, through the pain he was in, could feel her trembling hands on his shoulders. Inexpressible despair and tenderness towards her engulfed his whole being.

Then Giulia sat down beside him and put up her hand to straighten her wind-blown hair.

"Giulia short hair now. Never have long hair again, never!"

Ivan gritted his teeth. His mind refused to accept the fact that death was inevitable—but what could he do? What?

"Ivanio," Giulia exclaimed, making a sudden recovery. "Let's eat bread—*mangiare!*"

She took the last piece of bread out of the jacket pocket and with a sudden burst of joy in her tear-filled eyes, broke it into two.

"Here, Ivanio!"

He took the bigger piece—there was no longer any sense in measuring and evening them out. They enjoyed the bread, the last piece they had intended to save for the Bear Range. Then Ivan felt still more acutely the inevitable end. The strange thing was that this last piece of bread seemed to him to be the last hope of remaining alive—by eating it they were rounding off the cares of life so that the only thing that was left to them was to live the remaining few moments and die. Ivan was again filled with sorrow at the thought of so much effort wasted at such a time! The boys in the East had already liberated their native land and had crossed the frontiers of the Soviet Union and were coming towards them; but he would not be there to meet them even though he had made such an effort to do so...

Giulia cast a glance full of despair at the gloomy ravine looking now and again at those up above them who did not go away but

sat there watching them.

"Ivanio! Where is God? Where is Madonna? Where is justice? Why fascism not punished?" she asked, wringing her delicate brown hands in her despair.

"There is justice and they will be punished!" he said, as though he had suddenly been awakened. "They'll be punished!"

"Who punish them? England? America? Soviet Union?"

"Of course the Soviet Union will. The Soviet Union will break the necks of those swine."

"Soviet Union?"

"Of course."

Giulia turned towards him, her eyes filled with a sudden hope.

"Is it good? Is it the best? The best of all?"

He stared at her with unseeing eyes.

"What?"

"Russia. Is it good? Just? Noble? Yesterday Ivanio tell me true, eh?"

It was in a new light that he suddenly saw her, himself and his distant country, what that country had been to him all his life, and what it could have been.

"Yes," he answered firmly, "Russia is the very best, the most beautiful country, the pride of the whole world. There's nowhere better! And just think what it will be like in the future, after the war. When we have crushed Hitler. If I could only see it, if I could see it just for one day! Only one day!.."

In his excitement he tore bunches of coarse lichen from the rocks; a wave of intolerably intense love for his native land swept through him and he could not say another word; he felt that he was ready to cry, something that had never happened to him before. Giulia seemed to understand that, and put her hand tenderly on his knee.

"I know," she said, almost through tears but with a bright smile. "I know. I believe you. Little time I thought Ivan no say truth. I was wrong..."

She seemed somehow to have taken heart all at once, to have really brightened up. It was cold, a piercing wind was blowing from out of the canyon and Giulia pulled the leather jacket round her body and legs. Her red, bleeding feet were cold as they rested on the stones and there was nothing to cover them with. She suddenly remembered something and turned to face the Germans, rose to her knees and began singing, simply and without any introduction, her favourite Russian song, *Katyusha*—"The apples and pears were blooming..."

At first Ivan was surprised—the song seemed very much out of place on the brink of that grave—but when he saw how the Germans suddenly stood stock still up there on the saddle, he joined in.

The song seemed to have astonished the Germans, for they shouted something; Ivan did not care to listen, he was fully engrossed in the simple melody that had unexpectedly relieved them of their feelings of doom and had carried them into another world, a world that was humane and indescribably bright.

The Germans were soon fed up with their insolence—one of them slipped his submachine gun off his shoulder and fired a burst towards them—this time the bullets raised little clouds of dust among the stones, which were quickly swept away by the wind. Ivan pulled Giulia down by the skirt of the leather jacket and she unwillingly bent to hide her head behind a rock.

"Shoot, you swine, shoot! Let them hear!" he said to himself, thinking of the camp that were all ears when the sounds of shots in the mountains came down to them. "Let them know we're still alive!"

They lay behind the barrier of rocks for several minutes, waiting as long as the bursts of fire thundered over the ravine. Very few bullets reached them, however, the Germans were only trying to scare them, to keep them afraid and submissive. The firing stopped. The echo rolled over a long distance and before it had had time to die away altogether, the wind brought new, but familiar sounds from the other side of the pass. Giulia threw back her head, prepared to say something, but Ivan stopped her with a gesture—they listened intently, staring at each other. Although Giulia was there beside him, Ivan cursed roundly—dogs were baying on the saddle.

His long suppressed rage suddenly burst out; he rose to full height and stood there with his feet wide apart, infuriated and terrible to see.

"Brutes!" he screamed at the Germans. "Beasts! So you're afraid of us! You've sent for helpers! You won't take us, anyway! D'you get that?"

Of course, they could have shot him, but they did not shoot, they seemed to be trying to understand what that escapee was shouting to them. Ivan was filled with nervous excitement and was shivering—he was probably running a temperature. He looked up—the weather was clearing up, through breaks in the clouds he could see patches of blue, bright in the rays of the morning sun. He expected the Bear Range to appear out of the clouds at any moment, the Bear Range that he would never reach. He wanted so much to see it and the sun, but the mountains were still hidden and the sun would not appear, and that made him intolerably bitter.

Ivan dropped to the ground—that which was about to happen no longer interested him since he knew it all in advance. He did not even look round when the dogs appeared on the saddle—they came on and on, aroused by the excitement of the chase. Giulia suddenly

threw herself on Ivan, pressed close to him and covered her face with her hands.

"Not dogs! Not dogs! Ivanio, shoot, quick, shoot!"

Both his rage and the shock were suddenly gone, and he again grew calm. It would be easy to kill himself, but to kill Giulia was terrible, and still he had to do it. It was the only way. He could not allow the S.S. to take them alive so as to hang them in the camp. No! Let them drag the dead back! Since they had not been able to reach freedom, let their deaths at last annoy the Germans.

At that moment the Germans unleashed the dogs.

One, two, three, four, five Alsatians, let off the leash, stretched out as they raced downhill, the Germans following behind them. Realising that the S.S. men were almost on top of them, Ivan jumped up and seized Giulia by the arm; she threw her arms around his neck and her tears choked her. He realised that he ought to say something—the most important thing of all remained in his heart unsaid, but all words had somehow disappeared, and the dogs were already whining in anticipation as they raced down the hollow. He pushed her away from him to the very brink of the precipice. The girl did not resist, she only gasped as though she were choking; her eyes grew bigger and bigger, but there were no tears in them—there was nothing now but fear and a cry stilled by that fear.

On the brink he glanced down into the ravine—it was still gloomy, dank and cold; the mist had become thinner, however, and here and there patches of snow stood out bright. One of these patches crept upwards in a narrow tongue and a daring but hopeful idea flashed through his mind. He was afraid there would be no time and so he said nothing to Giulia; he lowered the already raised pistol and pushed the girl to the very edge of the precipice.

"Jump!"

Giulia staggered back in fear and he shouted again.

"Jump into the snow!" She again hurled herself back and covered her face with her hands.

In the meantime the dogs, as Ivan could judge by the sound of their baying close behind him, were at a stone's throw from them. He pushed the pistol between his teeth and jumped towards the girl. In a burst of sudden and furious strength he seized her by the collar and the seat of her trousers and hurled her madly into the abyss, feet forward. In the last instant he saw her body spread-eagled in the air as she flew over the precipice, but whether she fell into the snow or not he was not destined to see. He only realised that he, with his bad leg, would not be able to jump that far.

The dogs howled furiously as they saw him there and Ivan moved a couple of paces away from the brink. The leading dog was a great hulking wolfhound with one ear; it leapt over the bould-

ers and reared right beside him. Ivan did not take aim, but unhurriedly, with the almost superhuman attention he was still capable of, fired straight into its open jaws and then, without a pause fired at the second. One Ear, carried on by inertia flew past him straight into the abyss, but the second was not alone–two more dogs were running abreast of it and Ivan did not have time to see whether he had hit it or not.

His bewilderment was cut short by a smashing blow in the chest, an unbearable pain gripped his throat, for an instant the cloudy sky flashed before his eyes and was then shut out for ever...

Epilogue

To Ivan's relatives, to the people who knew him, the village of Tereshki by the Two Blue Lakes in Byelorussia–Greetings!

Giulia Novelli is writing to you from Rome and asks you not to be surprised that an unknown Italian lady knows your fellow-countryman, knows the village of Tereshki beside the Two Blue Lakes in Byelorussia and is able today to send you this letter.

You have not, of course, forgotten that terrible time in the world, humanity's black night, when thousands of people were dying with despair in their hearts. Some people left this life blessing death as a deliverance from the torments fascism still had in store for them, and this gave them strength to meet the end with dignity and not sin before their own conscience. Others, in a heroic duel, forced death itself to its knees and provided mankind with a lofty example of courage; and these people died, amazing even their enemies who, when they won, found no satisfaction in their victory, so doubtful was that victory.

Such a man was your fellow-countryman, Ivan Tereshka, with whom the will of Providence brought me together on the hard road of victorious struggle and tremendous loss. I had the good fortune to share with Ivan the last three days of his life–days as long as centuries, days of flight, love and unbelievable happiness. It was not God's will that I should share death with Ivan–fate or an ordinary snowdrift that had not thawed out on the mountainside saved me from being killed in a ravine. Then some good people picked me up, warmed me and saved my life. All that, of course, happened later, but at that very first moment when I opened my eyes and realised that I was alive, Ivan was already dead–high up among the clouds the baying of the dogs was dying down and there was nothing but the echo of his two shots that thundered down the ravine, rolling further and further away.

Gradually I returned to life. At first it seemed to have no

meaning for me without him, and my long months of loneliness were filled only by the memory of those sad and happy days I lived together with him. I could describe him to you, tell you what sort of man Ivan was, but I am sure you know him better than I do. I only want to tell you that all my subsequent life has been inseparable from him–my modest work in the Peace Committee and the publication of a trade union newspaper and bringing up his son Giovanni who is now eighteen and intends to become a journalist. (Incidentally, he translated my letter into Russian because I do not know your language as well as my son although I have studied it.) Another thing–I have a map of Byelorussia hanging in my room, a map of the country Ivan loved so well. It is a pity I have no photo of Ivan. Any sort of photo, as a child, as a young man, or, still better, as a soldier.

Sometimes when I recall Ivan I shudder at the thought that I might never have met him, that I might have been in some other camp and not seen his struggle with the Kommandoführer, *and that I might not have escaped with him after the terrible explosion; in fact, I might have passed him by and never have known him at all. But that did not happen and now I give thanks to Providence, thanks for all the trials that fell to my lot, thanks for the chance that brought us together.*

That is all. Finita.

With gratitude to all–to those who bore, brought up and knew this man, purely Russian in the generosity of his heart and truly worthy of admiration for his courage. Remember him always!

Thank you, thank you for everything,

Yours sincerely,

Giulia Novelli of Rome

1964

HOLD OUT TILL DAWN

Chapter One

"That's all. No arguments, fall the men in!" said Ivanovsky to Dyubin, breaking off the conversation and going out from behind the barn.

Long-legged, lean and awkwardly built, in a loose white camouflage suit, Sergeant-Major Dyubin stopped in mid-word. In the snowy twilight of the swiftly approaching night, his face, tanned by the cold and the wind and creased with premature wrinkles, twitched with dissatisfaction. After a short pause that testified to his tacit disagreement with the lieutenant, Dyubin walked briskly along a barely visible path in the snow towards the carefully closed door of a shed. There was no need for it to be shut any more. With a sweeping movement Dyubin flung it open and it hung swaying on one hinge.

"On your feet! Fall in outside!"

Ivanovsky stopped and listened. The subdued murmur of voices in the shed suddenly died down and a hush fell, as if all were hypnotized by the irrevocability of this essentially commonplace army order, which meant too much to everybody this time... A moment later, however, things suddenly got moving, voices were heard, and the first man stepped out of the dark doorway into the pure white of the snow. "Pivovarov," noted Ivanovsky abstractedly, looking at the white figure in a brand new camouflage suit, expectantly rigid outside the dark wall of the shed. However, Ivanovsky promptly forgot about him, engrossed in his own worries and listening to the sergeant-major shouting bossily in the shed.

"Outside, quickly! Don't forget anything, we're not coming back!" Dyubin's anxiously stern voice was muffled by the timber walls.

The sergeant-major was clearly in a bad temper because he had not been able to agree with the lieutenant after all, although he had shown no sign of dissent. Incidentally, Dyubin could be as inwardly angry as he liked; that was his personal affair,

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but while Ivanovsky was in charge here, he was the one who made the decisions. He had already decided, finally and irrevocably, that they were going to cross the lines right now, because it was impossible to postpone indefinitely. He had waited nearly six days and nights, the lines had been quite near then—some thirty kilometres away, but now they were at a distance of sixty kilometres, he had just measured it on the map. Over the actual terrain, it would, of course, take longer. True, the nights are drawn out at the end of November; but too much depended on this one night of theirs for precious time to be wasted to no purpose.

The lieutenant determinedly took the end pair of skis leaning against the wall—they were his own—and walked off the path into the snow, three paces in front of the group as it formed up in line. The men were hurriedly sorting out their skis and pulling their hoods over their heads. The wind, coming from round the corner of the shed, angrily buffeted the thin cotton of the camouflage suits and lashed their chests with the long ends of their laces. In spite of Ivanovsky's efforts to dispense with everything superfluous, there was more than enough to carry, and all his ten soldiers now looked misshapen and awkward in their thick jerkins, festooned under the camouflage blouses with packs, grenade bags, small-arms, pouches and cartridge-belts. In addition to all this, there were the skis, which seemed the least necessary of all just now, but would be very much needed later, behind the German lines. All his hopes were staked on the skis. It was what he had proposed back there in HQ—to put the group on skis, and this idea of his had immediately and readily been approved by all, from the phlegmatic head of the Intelligence Department to the captious chief of staff, who was harassed by work matters and subordinates.

How to apply this idea was another matter.

This was the problem that dominated his thoughts as, quietly and hiding his impatience, he waited for the group to fall in. In the snowy dusk, as they sorted out the bundles of skis, there was a muffled clattering and the clumsy, overloaded men kept colliding on the narrow path. What sort of a show were they going to put up on skis? There hadn't been time to check them properly on a ski-trail. They had moved up to the front-line zone by daylight, bent double and making their way through the undergrowth. He had spent that morning observing the enemy at the rifle battalion commander's observation post. A fine snow had been falling all day from the low, overcast sky; towards evening, it had begun falling more thickly and the lieutenant had been delighted. He had already studied the whole route of the crossing, memorizing every knoll on it. Now it had started snowing—what could be better! But as soon as it began to turn dark, the wind veered round, the snow abated, and now it had stopped altogether; only a few meagre

flakes were floating in the still air, blindly attaching themselves to the timber walls of the shed. The sergeant-major suggested waiting a couple of hours: it was sure to fall again and they could manage better if it was snowing.

"And if it isn't?" counter-queried Ivanovsky. "Lose half the night waiting—is that it?"

It was no use losing half the night, since their whole route was calculated for a full one. Incidentally, the sergeant-major could not be accused of lacking sense: if the crossing failed, the fullest and longest night would not be any use to them at all.

Sergeant Lukashov, a regular, took up his position as right marker on the path, a sturdy, silent, husky foot-slogging infantryman. The assistant platoon commander by appointment, he had been specially posted from the Army HQ Security Battalion for this assignment. There was something confident, strong and reliable in his whole appearance and his unhurried, precise movements. Falling in next to him on the path was a ranker, Khakimov, also a rifleman. Although no order had yet been given, his swarthy face with its dark, knitted brows was already tense with expectation as he watched the commander. His rifle in one hand and skis in the other were at the "order arms" position. Next to him, straightening the somewhat heavy load of TNT on his shoulders, stood Sudnik, a demolition expert, still only a boy, intelligent and fairly tough-looking. He had been one of the few volunteers for the group after his mate had put his name down for it—another sapper, Sheludyak, with whom he had worked on equipment for the Army HQ Command Post. Ivanovsky did not know what sort of a demolition man Sheludyak might be, but he was distinctly no great shakes on a pair of skis. This had been obvious from the start. Fussy and awkward, this forty-year-old, who was not yet even in line, had already dropped his skis; they and the sticks were splaying out in all directions. He made an effort to collect them up and dropped his rifle in the snow.

"Can't tie 'em properly, eh?" Dyubin stepped towards him. "Give 'em here."

"How well d'you ski?" asked Ivanovsky with a foreboding of trouble.

"Me? So-so. I used to go skiing once..."

"Once!" thought the lieutenant irritably. "Hell, I've got some right ones here. Never know what to expect next." It was his own fault; he should have questioned them all, interviewed each separately and watched him on skis. But he had not had the time: he had spent a busy two days at HQ with the head of Intelligence, then with the artillery commander, then in the Political Dapartment and then in the Special Department. The group had been made up by others in his absence.

It was quickly getting dark; a cold winter's night was setting in, it had virtually stopped snowing, and the lieutenant began to hurry things up. Dyubin was too long tying up Sheludyak's skis. His men were standing in line with impatient looks on faces that were dark under the camouflage hoods. Behind Sheludyak, the impressive and handsome Krasnokutsky, in a pointed Budyonovka helmet like Dyubin, was shifting from one foot to the other, then the long-necked Kezevich stood motionless, and the inconspicuous, taciturn Zayats. The last on the path was probably the youngest one there, Pivovarov, from the lieutenant's own part of the country and also a gunner. No, the lieutenant did not know them properly, the men with whom he must soon share glory or death, but he had no option. Naturally, it would be better to set off on such a mission with battle-hardened soldiers whom he knew well. But where were they now? He already had difficulty in remembering all the little hamlets, graveyards, woods and hills where the men of his own battery lay in common or solitary graves or simply hadn't been found. In five months of war, not many had survived; a week before, only four had broken out with him from behind the German lines. Two of them got frostbite and one was wounded while crossing the lines at Alexeyevka. Junior Sergeant Voronkov, an artillery plotter, had stayed with him to the end. This Voronkov would have been very useful now, but Ivanovsky had been unable to trace him. They had sent him to a rifle battalion on the front line, from where, unfortunately, men don't always return.

"Atten-shun! Right dress! Comrade Lieutenant..."

"At ease!" said Ivanovsky. "Do all the men know where we're going?"

"Yes," said Lukashov in his deep voice. The others agreed in silence.

"We're going to call on the Germans. Why and what for, I'll tell you later. But now... Anyone wishes to report sick? No? So we're all fit, are we? Who can't ski?"

The short line became watchfully still. The dark faces, drawn with expectation, looked sternly and obediently from under the cotton hoods at their commander, who was now indiscriminately assuming command of their destinies. All were silent, probably not fully aware of what lay in store for them, but they had no option save to rely wholly on him, their commander, and also on this lanky sergeant-major who had been in charge of the group for two days.

Ivanovsky slipped his hand through a slit in his camouflage breeches into his pocket and took out a solid, cube-shaped clock which he had once taken from a knocked-out German tank. The clock ticked briskly on the palm of his hand, its phosphorescent dial gleaming. It was ten minutes to seven.

"So, we have twelve hours at our disposal. During that time, of

course, minus an hour or two for crossing the enemy's battle positions, we have to cover sixty kilometres. Chear? Who isn't up to it?"

He ran his eyes expectantly over the line in which no one stirred, and it was so quiet that snowflakes could be heard being blown off the roof by the wind. But again no one answered this now far from trivial question.

"That's all, then. Sergeant-Major, bring up the rear. Group, after me, quick march!"

No one was seeing them off this time. All the hasty preparations for the crossing had been completed earlier. An hour ago, at the Command Post of the rifle battalion commander, they had agreed that the battalion would keep quiet so as not to alert the Germans while the group would try to sneak through unnoticed in the early twilight. Incidentally, if help were needed, what help could come from a battalion that was one in name only and in fact consisted of a rifle company, under a recent company commander, a senior lieutenant formerly in charge of the machine gunners? He promised to give them fire cover in an extreme emergency, although this promise was extracted on the insistence of a captain from the Army HQ Intelligence Department who was present. But the captain would stay awhile and soon leave, and the battalion had to go on fighting; it was not well-off for ammunition and Command would want it saved for a more important occasion.

True, the captain did not altogether insist that the lieutenant should make the crossing here and today. Since the snow was easing off and the broad river flood plain with its winding strip of undergrowth in the middle opened out, wide and empty, before them, the representative from HQ hesitated.

"Yes, indeed. As on the palm of your hand. Decide for yourself, Lieutenant. You know best."

"I'm going," said Ivanovsky simply.

"Well, that's your business. Perhaps it's for the best. Sneak in where they're not expecting it."

"The devil knows where they're not expecting us. No way of asking them," thought the lieutenant worriedly. But he could not postpone any longer; in an operation like the one on which they were now leaving, delay could mean death. And he was already delayed beyond measure, although, of course, not of his own free will...

Sinking into the snow up to their ankles and sometimes up to their knees, the soldiers climbed up a hill in single file. Ivanovsky looked back and for the first time felt pleased; his short column had obediently closed up, no one had fallen behind or delayed. He halted, and the others did likewise almost simultaneously. Further on, they would have to wait, perhaps have a rest and even dig down into the snow; they might be spotted by the Germans from the hill-

top now. It was quiet over the flood plain and the slopes on which the battalion was positioned. The distant rumble of battle could only be heard rolling up from behind the wood on the right, where something was flashing dimly in a sky turbid with low cloud. The flood plain receded into the darkness with its murky smears of bushes, snow-sprinkled patches of reeds over the river and the crests of weeds sticking out of the snow. It was half a kilometre to the river, no less. They had to cross this space on all fours; then they would have to crawl a fair distance on their bellies, but it was hard to tell what it would be like after that; the main thing was to get as soon as possible to the other side of the flood plain and into the safety of the wood, completely invisible from where they were just now.

"Lie down! Follow me!" muttered the lieutenant and he lowered himself on his elbows in the snow.

The snow was deep and fluffy, like cotton wool, and searingly cold. It penetrated mercilessly through all the slits in the camouflage suits, into mittens, up sleeves, down the chest and into the tops of the boots, and then melted there, spreading a cold, disgusting wetness all over the body. The mixture of sweat and damp made them shiver and steam by turns, and a suffocating gorge rose to their throats. Ivanovsky pulled the three-fingered mitten from his hand with his teeth and tugged with wet fingers at the laces of his hood. His face felt cooler and freer, and, above all, he had uncovered his ears and could hear the rustle of the wind in the weeds and incoherent, disjointed sounds behind him.

They crawled along for about half a kilometre. The hill, with its pine-grove, was only just visible as a grey shape behind on the rim of the gloomy nocturnal sky which, in the grey twilight, almost merged with the snow-covered plain. Fortunately, the furrows made by their bodies were invisible even from close-up, like the men themselves. True, only as long as it was dark. Ivanovsky knew that it only needed a flare to go up and the whole trail made by them in the snow would become as visible as on the palm of the hand; so would the men themselves.

Meanwhile, however, it was dark and quiet. The heavy, muffled rumble of battle scarcely reached them from behind the forest. Over there, since evening, broad glimmers of light had been flickering across the horizon, the glow of a distant barrage, and the frozen ground under their elbows trembled dully and deeply. Over that way, too, behind the forest, the yellow stars of flares very occasionally fluttered up into the sky but promptly died out in the blurred mingling of light and dark.

They must get across that flood plain as soon as possible. They had not yet crossed its near edge, and there was still the most dan-

gerous part of the trip, along the stream. Even now the group was showing signs of fatigue, however, and was noticeably beginning to string out. Ivanovsky suddenly realized that he could not hear the breathing of Lukashov, who had been crawling behind him. The lieutenant looked round and waited a moment, himself taking a breather, although he knew that there could be no delay here, not even for a minute. Fatigue, however, had evidently taken the edge off vigilance; for the second time, something clattered not far away, probably a rifle against skis. The lieutenant tensed nervously, peering angrily into the snowy semi-darkness. Butterfingers! There was no other word for it! He simply didn't have the chance to give them an earful of strong language. For all his reiterated warnings that the skis must be held in the left hand and the rifle in the right, someone had grabbed them together and was now clattering them like hockey-sticks...

A grey hump in a camouflage suit stirred in the darkness behind him, breathing noisily. It crawled up and stopped dead at the lieutenant's feet. Someone else was moving up behind; it was impossible to see further back because of the darkness and the snow.

"Are they advancing?" asked Ivanovsky in a hoarse, tired whisper.

"Yes, commander," replied the sergeant in the same whisper.

"Pass on the word—we're to move faster."

In the low ground, the snow became even deeper and the men were sinking in it up to their shoulders. They could feel the frozen, prickly grass under their wet knees—presumably the beginning of a marsh. Ivanovsky did not look at his compass; as usual, he was working out the direction from the characteristic changes in the terrain which he had memorized when studying the map. They must keep to the low ground all the time here, get as far as the bushes on the bank of the river and crawl further through the bushes. They had a long way to go on their bellies yet, and it was going to take it out of them. Just so long as they didn't bump into some camouflaged secret German listening post. In that event, they would not be able to proceed unnoticed and everything could come to a nasty end right at the very beginning.

Ivanovsky, however, banished these thoughts from his mind and peered ahead throughout the now dense gloom. It looked as though the dark shapes of the bushes were not far away; beyond them lay the snow-sprinkled stream. This place, as he knew from the map, was situated right in the middle of no-man's land; further on up the hill began a small mortar-shelled little hamlet in which the Germans had taken up position. True, the first trench was much nearer, about a hundred metres beyond the stream. Once there, the group would have to turn off along the stream and try to slip through the bushes between that little trench and another,

to one side, on a hill that looked like a big inverted spoon.

Meanwhile, the snow had become not only deeper but was completely soft; they could hear under their hands the rustle of frozen grass that had not been mown in the summer. They were crawling over a marsh. Ivanovsky pressed his knee down too hard and went through a still fragile carpet of moss from under which the water squirted stiffly on to the snow. He stopped for a second to listen and ascertain if he had not given himself away with this incautious movement. The bushes began here, however, there were branches of elder sticking up quite near, and shoots of red willow that rose up out of the snow like an impenetrable wall. Ivanovsky crawled a little further under the bushes to give his now extended group time to pull up closer and dispose themselves safely under cover. The bushes shielded them from the direction of the hamlet, and they needed have no fear of flares either. True, there was still the open and dangerous spoon hill on the other side, but it was some distance away. There was some chance of not beeing noticed from there, even by the light of flares.

All the time, the lieutenant had to restrain himself from standing up and looking back to check that the last few had not strung out too far. It was now very important to keep them all close together; in the present situation, any spreading out would be tantamount to disaster. True, in that event there was someone to take charge. The last man was Dyubin, who was evidently no fool—half as old again as the lieutenant himself. But Dyubin was a reservist, and although not lacking in character, did he have enough front-line savvy? Ivanovsky, himself a regular officer who had experienced all the anguish of war since that first day in June, was somewhat mistrustful of the reservists and, for greater security and reliability, usually tried to shoulder some of their duties. Today's brief clash with the sergeant-major, who had suggested delaying the crossing, had left both with an unpleasant after-taste in the mouth... The lieutenant could not bear sharing his authority with anyone, especially when carrying out a mission on which he was relying solely on himself, his own resources and his own determination. Meanwhile, everything went well, and if his luck did not fall and he succeeded, then, when the occasion arose, he would remind Dyubin...

"Where next, Comrade Lieutenant?" whispered Lukashov hoarsely behind him in the furrow of powdery snow.

"Shh! How are they back there?"

"Crawling up. Only Sheludyak's behind..."

Sheludyak again! That Sheludyak had already exasperated the lieutenant with his awkwardness back in the battalion, but in the rush of hasty preparations, Ivanovsky had simply forgotten about him, assuming that he was fit and would make it. Moreover, the

group needed a sapper, and there was no option, he had to take the first who came to hand, which was that elderly and awkward character. But how many times had war already convinced him that, apart from ordinary strength, ability and training were necessary too? Incidentally, the men had not had any training; there simply hadn't been time for it. For a whole day, the chief of Intelligence and the head of the Special Department had scanned and vetted the lists for the right men. When they had finally made up the group, there had not even been time to think of training.

Leaving his skis, Ivanovsky went round Lukashov and crawled back along his trail. Sheludyak had indeed fallen behind the sergeant and was now wearily and heavily ploughing through the snow, holding up the rest in the process. The lieutenant greeted him with an angry whisper:

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sweating, blast it! Will we get on to skis soon?"

"Look lively!"

His upraised hindquarters swaying, weighed down under his camouflage suit by a heavy pack of explosives, Sheludyak crawled off on his hands and knees to catch up the sergeant. The others moved on behind him. The lieutenant let Khakimov through, Zayats, Sudnik and someone else whose face he could not distinguish under the lowered hood. Then he waited for Sergeant-Major Dyubin.

"What's happened?" asked the latter, stopping briefly beside Ivanovsky. The lieutenant did not answer. What was there to answer? Surely the sergeant-major could see that the group had strung out, had violated the necessary order to which the sergeant-major, as the man bringing up the rear, had a definite relationship.

"Who was that clattering at the tail-end?"

"Clattering? I didn't hear anything."

Of course he hadn't heard anything, Ivanovsky did not pursue the subject any further, froze and listened. All was quiet in the vicinity, however. Our own people on the hill with its pine-grove were watchfully silent and the Germans ahead were also keeping quiet. Nine humped bodies in white snow-sprinkled camouflage suits were lying evenly in the snowy ditch they had dug.

"You ought to have heard," observed Ivanovsky in a brief whisper. "We're crossing soon. I don't want to hear a squeak out of you!"

The sergeant-major did not say anything and the lieutenant crawled quickly forward on all fours, skirting the men as he did so. He could not see their faces but almost physically sensed their expectant and alarmed eyes on him under the hoods. All were silent.

He overtook Sheludyak, who was sprawling in the furrow, gasping apologetically.

"With all your might!" demanded Ivanovsky grimly. "With all your might, Sheludyak! Understand?"

The lieutenant crawled to the head of his now tightened-up file and again moved off through the deepest snow on the fringe of the bushes, dragging his skis over the snow with one hand and the submachine gun with the other. The bag of ammunition discs was slipping off his hip and going under his belly and he had to keep swinging it up on to his back. In the snow, he ran into a heap of brushwood that cracked noisily in the night. His camouflage blouse snagged on something and tore; his skis got stuck in the snow. Swearing under his breath, the lieutenant spent a minute extricating himself from this trap, then headed to one side, a little further from the bushes. Somewhere not far ahead he should come to a brook falling into the stream. At this point, the most dangerous sector of the route began—through the gap in the German line.

Before he had crawled as far as the brook, however, something cracked in the air ahead and quite near, hissed and sparkled. A fiery arc sailed over the rim of the sky. Flustered by his battle with the snow, Ivanovsky did not immediately realize that this was a rocket flare. Not quite reaching them, it blossomed triumphantly above into a spray of blindingly blazing light, and the snowy plain with its bushes cringed, froze and shrank, flooded by its feverish brilliance. Then something up there wavered and quivered, everything plunged sideways, and a maze of flying shadows darted across the flood plain. The flare fell on to the snow behind the bushes and the remains of its cold fire glittered there for several seconds more.

Ivanovsky lay dead still, hardly breathing, his chest bursting for want of air, the snow dust whirling near his face in the wind. He was expecting shots, shouts and more flares, but the former tensely ominous silence reigned in the growing darkness of night. He closed his eyes for a moment to recover from his blindness as quickly as possible, then peered ahead again. He was puzzled where the flare could have come from; there ought not to be any Germans where it had been launched—there was marsh over there, a brook and bushes. That was where he had to go. That way was now barred.

Lukashov behind him touched his boot, but the lieutenant did not look round and did not even answer, now worried by one single question: had they been spotted or not? If so, then the night's attempt was over. If not, they must get out of this ill-starred place as soon as possible.

Another minute passed, but there were no shots or flares, and Ivanovsky thought that a rocket-man must have been sent out there for the night and it would be prudent to avoid him. The lieu-

tenant turned sharply into the bushes, crawled on all fours as far as the low bank of the river, over which leaned several black, squat alder-trees, and rolled off the bank on to the smooth surface of the snow-powdered ice. On the other bank the scrub was thinner, a narrow strip running along the bank. Further on came the hill with its village and the German trench under the lopsided barn just beyond.

Sergeant Lukashov had not fallen a single pace behind, and when the lieutenant stopped in indecision, the other crawled up beside him and whispered, "Let's go by the stream..."

"Shh..."

The situation was getting more complicated. On this side they were now too near the enemy; it was impossible to get past them except along the bank. Of course it was tempting to make for the level surface of the frozen river, but it wound in and out here like a tangled rope. "How long would it take to negotiate all those loops?" wondered Ivanovsky glumly. "And what if the ice is too thin in places?"

It seemed to him that far too much time had elapsed, that he had spent an unforgivably long time in these bushes and had been late from the very outset. Trembling with sudden alarm, the lieutenant looked round, but all behind him had already crossed the stream and were waiting to move on further. In the grey of the night, several faces nearby were vaguely dark, the others were altogether invisible and he crawled off across the snow with renewed determination.

This time he did not crawl far, for again, and from the same place, a flare soared up and with it came the crack of a shot. The lieutenant hugged the snow, staring as hard as he could into the black tangle of branches silhouetted against the brilliantly illuminated whiteness of the snow. The flare was going in the former direction, toward the far side of the flood plain from which they had crawled. That meant they had not been noticed after all. He waited until the flare burned out, tugged at his bundle of skis with relief and moved off on his elbows and knees. In the intense darkness, he could not see anything in front of him for several long seconds and just went on ploughing away through the snow and dragging the skis along with him. Yet again he was blinded by an incredibly brilliant light that swooped forcefully down straight from the sky on to the flood plain; the snow shone and sparkled, the shadows of the bushes quickly rotated on the flood plain in a broad semicircle, made a vivid imprint on the snow and were still. He was still too, conscious every moment that the garishly white open space could suddenly be raked with stuttering bursts of machine-gun fire. As always at a moment of extreme danger, he reacted quickly; he realized that this was from the barn, which meant it

was very close. The flare burned up in the sky without leaving a trace, but it was quiet as before, and again he shut his eyes tight, waiting for his blindness to pass. If they had been noticed, they must head back over the stream and get under cover of its bank. Otherwise, they must crawl on as quickly and as far away as possible from this confounded place where they were being floodlit from both directions.

There were still no shots, which meant they hadn't been noticed yet. Boldly determined, he rushed forward, suddenly feeling ready for risks and success again. Faster, faster! With new-found strength and agility, he crawled along the bank, well down in the snow which mercilessly choked his face and mouth, would not let him breathe and blinded his eyes. When his sight returned with his former capacity to see in the dark, he suddenly noticed that to the left of the village he was sheltered by a kind of ridge, roughly knee-high; probably the boundary between a cornfield and meadow. He was overjoyed at this and no longer afraid of the flares. All his will was aimed in one direction–forward!

He crawled fast and for a long time. The clothes on his back and chest were already wet with snow and perspiration. He did not look round at his men: there was no point in it; he could not urge them on now. He was relying solely on his personal example, on the force of the soldier's law–to take the lead from the commander.

When another flare blazed up in the sky, he froze with his arm extended to the front and looked round with his head low above the snow; yes, the men had strung out once more and there was a gap of about twenty paces behind the sergeant again. Unfortunately, the boundary ended just there, so that there was no longer any cover from the forward German trench. One good thing–the barn on the hill was now behind them and the flare was already flying towards their rear. In front of them stretched a wide, level zone with rows of sparse bushes vanishing in the darkness along one side of it.

The flare went out and he felt relieved; the hardest part was already over. It was so good, that brief moment of restrained joy; but before he had time to push his bundle of skis forward, a rifle shot cracked close behind. Almost horrified, Ivanovsky spun round, his hand automatically reaching for the small of the butt of his bandaged submachine gun, but he could not see any sign of movement behind or on either side. Everything around seemed dead; just that one shot, not another sound, and nobody anywhere near. A few seconds later, however, a brilliant light appeared in two places over the bushes. Looking over his shoulder the lieutenant followed the flight of the flares. Like the ones before, they fell behind; but two more whizzed up on either side of the stream.

In the bright light they cast, a machine gun let loose a concentrated, penetrating rattle of fire; fiery tracers whipped the bushes near the brook and several bullets ricocheted off the ridge behind which they had only just been taking cover and made splashes of green as they flew in all directions. The machine gun was blindly but unerringly probing for them in the light of the flares and was feeling for them with streams of bullets so close that they were saved only by the boundary. Ivanovsky lay grinding his teeth in dumb despair; it had all been going so well, and now look! It had been messed up by a damnfool rifle shot...

They must have lain there for some time. The lieutenant began shivering with cold, his wet underlinen clung to his body like an icy coat of mail. Some ten flares were blazing in the sky; the machine gun near the barn seemed to be quietening down. Then Lukashov tugged at his boot a couple of times. Ivanovsky twisted his head round.

"Kudryavets's hit."

"Badly?"

Instead of replying, the sergeant shrugged his shoulders and also looked back, probably expecting a clarification from there.

This was something to swear about, but Ivanovsky merely clutched the snow in his mittened hands. No two ways about it, the beginning had gone wrong, but even worse could happen soon; they could be discovered out in the open. Even so, there was no time to sort things out by crawling back now. He picked out the first man he distinguished in the dark behind the sergeant.

"Sheludyak, return to base. Pick up the wounded man and go back."

Something like dismay flickered across the sapper's face; nevertheless he ploughed through the snow, turned round and vanished into the dark. Ivanovsky suddenly had second thoughts; it would be better to send someone more capable with the wounded man instead, but he did not bother to recall Sheludyak at that point. "Let him live!" he thought with unexpected magnanimity. Not everyone had the luck, but that old man probably had more right to survive than the rest. After all, he was the father of a family, he had three children at home, and that should be remembered.

The Germans near the barn were silent; they evidently hadn't spotted anything. It was quiet. Only the artillery barrage rumbled beyond the forest. Ivanovsky began to worry again about the time which, in spite of everything, was flying diabolically fast. He was even afraid that he was going to be hopelessly late. True, he had not foreseen such complications at the very beginning and he now thought dismally that there could be more.

Ivanovsky pressed on forward, but had not crawled ten paces when again he froze as a stream of tracers darted his way. Flat-

tened on the snow, the lieutenant stared toward where the barn was a scarce visible hump in the distance, and he briskly backed under the cover of the same small, scarcely noticeable boundary. They'd been spotted after all, by the look of it. Flares hissed and crackled as they seared the sky, and the machine-gun tracers glittered fierily in the dark, lashing, stitching, whipping up the snow right on their intended route from behind the hill. They had to get out of this trap at all costs, but there could be no thought of crossing that brightly illuminated field.

It looked as though they were well and truly stuck, and for a long time. One good thing: on the left they had that boundary, positively heaven-sent for their salvation—it was the only thing that covered them from the machine-gun fire coming from the hill. But how much longer could they stay under cover?

Meanwhile, they lay motionless and silent, waiting for Ivanovsky's decision as commander. He decided on the only course now possible: to silence the machine gun. The best way would clearly be to sneak up to it from the front, from the river. Only he himself could do this successfully. Only one, or two at the most, could risk going up to it unnoticed.

"Pass it on: I want the sergeant-major!"

The command went quickly down the line. Dyubin crawled up, and lay down noiselessly beside him.

"Listen. We've got to wipe out that machine gun," said Ivanovsky and, on being greeted by silence, explained: "Otherwise we won't get out. If anything happens, take the map and lead the group."

"It's no use that way," said Dyubin after a moment's silence. "It's got to be somebody else."

"Who else?" said the lieutenant. "I'm going to have a go at it myself."

He unbuttoned his jerkin, pulled a crumpled folded map out of his inside pocket and pushed his skis nearer to the sergeant-major. The machine gun was silent, a low-trajectory rocket sent over by the Germans was burning out on the snow and it became dark and quiet; but he knew that he only had to poke his head out from behind the boundary and the Germans would raise hell again. They were evidently watching.

"Lukashov, follow me," called the lieutenant quietly and did not look back, knowing that Lukashov would not lag behind. In the pitch darkness that followed, with a submachine gun in his hand and three grenades in his trouser pockets, he crawled along under cover of the boundary. He must hurry, otherwise his whole sortie would lose meaning. Of course, this was not the best thing, perhaps even the contrary, but he could find no other way out of the jam. The alternative was to return to his own lines, which

would also not be a simple matter now. He swore bitterly to himself and, as he ploughed through the snow, kept saying: "Shoot, you swine, make more noise!.."

He needed the machine-gun firing. When a machine gun is operating the gunner is deaf and blind; that would be just when the lieutenant would sneak up on him somehow. And, indeed, the machine gun started up again as soon as a flare went up. To his amazement, however, Ivanovsky could not see any of the tracers at first. The lieutenant's bewilderment was short-lived, however; the machine-gun bursts were aimed towards their rear, towards the flood plain and the river at the point where they had recently crawled across it through the bushes. This time the Germans meant business. A true conflagration of flares blazed up over the flood plain, it became as bright as day all round and the bullets flew on to the meadow from the hill, interlacing, converging and fanning out. Several machine guns from various points were frenziedly cutting up the bushes. At first, Ivanovsky instinctively pressed himself down into the snow, unable to see much from his furrow and straining to hear the dense, glittering whine overhead. But without looking, he quickly realized that they weren't shooting at random; it was all for Sheludyak's benefit. So they'd spotted the man after all, had caught him in the light of the flares and were now shooting him to pieces.

Once he realized this, Ivanovsky shuddered with joy because Sheludyak was drawing the fire. This must be made use of at once. The lieutenant promptly turned round in the snow, bounded on all fours to the head of his column that was lying still behind the boundary and grabbed his skis.

"Follow me!" he ordered aloud, not worried about being heard by the Germans in all that uproar.

Chapter Two

They did not crawl the last few metres to the forest but, bent double, ran wearily one after another till they ended up in the sparse, stunted bushes. Sprawling on the snow and gasping convulsively for breath, they said nothing for a minute, in no state to utter a word. One thought alone was beating away in time with their hearts: they'd made it somehow, they'd got through; the worst was behind them. The Germans on the hill had bungled. Distracted by firing at the meadow and blinded by the flares, they had probably not looked too hard to their flanks until they had finished off Sheludyak by the river. "Thank you, men!" thought Ivanovsky, deeply moved, lying on the snow and gulping the air into his lungs. The first price for his success had been paid. How

is it going to end? Whatever it may be, rest in peace, Private Sheludyak, sent to certain death, although at the time the lieutenant had thought with a kind of furtive envy that he was sending him back to life...

Without having fully recovered his breath, he pushed himself up into a sitting position on the snow. The infrequent glow-worms of bullets were threading the snowy dusk a long way behind, and others were sailing towards them from the pine-wood beyond the flood plain. That would be the battalion going into action. But here, near the bushes, it was quiet. In front of them lay a bare slope only lightly covered with snow, with crests of weeds running along the top of the boundaries. Ivanovsky took out his clock; it was half past nine.

"Who fired?" asked the lieutenant with restraint, belatedly flaring up as he remembered the ill-fated shot.

Someone not far away among the flattened bodies in white stirred and sat up on the snow. From the pointed shape under the hood, the commander recognized Dyubin: the sergeant-major was wearing a Budyonovka helmet.

"It was Sudnik."

"Yes, it was me," confirmed a guilty and muffled voice, and Sudnik rose slackly to his feet.

"Why did you fire?"

The soldier shifted the rifle at his foot.

"The safety catch slipped off."

Ivanovsky peered at the bandaged weapon and shook with fury—the man had a Tokarev automatic rifle; it held ten rounds, was impressive-looking, complex in design and not very reliable in action. It was simply a disaster that before leaving he hadn't inspected the weapons. How could anyone go behind the German lines with a weapon like that!

"Damn you!" said the lieutenant quietly unable to restrain his anger. "What sort of weapon is that you've got?"

"A rifle."

"What kind of rifle?"

"Self-loading Tokarev Number NM Six Hundred and Twenty-Four."

"NM! You couldn't have picked a worse one, I suppose?"

Only now realizing his blunder, the soldier hung his head guiltily. The lieutenant looked almost with hatred at him, weighted down by the pack and the wet camouflage suit clinging round his knees. However, his whole ungainly appearance now expressed only guilt and submissiveness. This submissiveness of his, and time, that was ceaselessly urging the lieutenant on, soon quenched the flame of commander's wrath. He realized that it was useless to take it out on the soldier for something he didn't understand. Nonethe-

less, he could not ignore the fact that because of his blunder, Sudnik had nearly destroyed the whole group.

"D'you realize what you've done?"

"The devil he does!" suddenly said Lukashov sitting up. "He's a bungler. Why did we have to take the likes of him?"

Sudnik as before stood in silence, his head bowed.

"I'm going to do you in for this," whispered the lieutenant threateningly. "Understand?"

The soldier's head sank even lower, but he clearly did not really know what to say in self-justification and seemed ready for anything.

"Very well. We'll talk to him afterwards," said Dyubin placatingly, no doubt sensing the indecision in the commander's voice.

"I'll deal with you later!" promised Ivanovsky, and gave the order: "On to your skis!"

All got moving at once, sorting out their skis and fastening them to their boots. It was no good hanging about here. The lieutenant gripped the end of his sticks and looked round, waiting until the group was ready.

"I'd teach him a lesson! I just didn't get the chance," growled Lukashov nearby as he pulled on his mittens.

"All right, that'll do!" interrupted Ivanovsky in a stage whisper. "Ready? Sudnik, after me—quick march!"

The lieutenant pushed off vigorously, heading for a gap in the bushes; but the skis glided badly in the powdery snow, sinking into deep ruts so that only the upcurved ends protruded. The branches clutched at his camouflage suit and tore the hood off his head. For something like a quarter of an hour, the lieutenant fought his way through the bushes until he finally came out into the open field. Here he was at once assailed by a gusty wind, but at least there was more space. Ivanovsky felt for a firm patch of snow with his skis and pushed off with his sticks. With his eyes to the front, the lieutenant did not look round; he could hear the swish of skis behind and the steady breathing of the men. His fury against Sudnik began to abate gradually; the worst disaster was over, and Ivanovsky began to accustom himself to the idea that there were eight of them left. True, he could not fully reconcile himself to this; he would need men very badly tomorrow, and Sudnik deserved to be punished severely. But how?.. He couldn't be put in the guardhouse here, that would have to be postponed until their return. Furthermore, they had been lucky on the whole. If you thought about it, there was no telling how things would have turned out if Sudnik had not fired, if Kudryavets had not been wounded and if he had not sent Sheludyak back with him, so that he had drawn the German fire. It was entirely possible that before morning they

would not have managed to break away from behind that boundary and that in the daylight they would easily have been strafed by mortars. Would it take much to wipe out ten men? But they had sneaked through, and now the main thing was not to bump into rear units of some kind during the night.

Soon he became aware of a downward slope in the snow; the skis glided forward more easily and his arms were freer. The lieutenant looked round. Sudnik was diligently following behind. After him, at a short interval, came Lukashov in the darkness. The others were also apparently pulling up, and he could hear the smooth swish of snow under skis in the windy night. The lieutenant increased the pace even further. The route was a long one, perhaps even too long for one night, and it was vital to hurry. Here he still remembered the route he had studied the evening before on the map and knew that soon there would be another flood plain by that same stream. They would have to keep to it all the time from that point on.

After the bushes, the soldiers got into the swing of it; the group moved smoothly through the grey nocturnal gloom. The starless sky had covered the winter spaces with a dense pall in which deeply darkened the blurred blobs of bushes, trees, weeds and much else besides that was indistinct and enigmatic. The flares over the front line were shining far behind them and the men could only see the glow from them winking behind the smooth-sided hill.

Ivanovsky began to calm down gradually. Although not altogether uneventfully, they had more or less made it at the start; they had broken through. True, Sheludyak haunted his thoughts; it had worked out so badly for him and he felt sorry for the man. He would certainly have been useful tomorrow; after all he had been a sapper and worldlywise, not a bungler like Sudnik. No, he'd had bad luck with sappers, although they were the ones he needed most. There was nothing he could do about it, however. While the group had been lying in the light of the flares, he would have sent half of them back if only that would have meant the other half breaking through.

The lieutenant knew only too well that far from everything in life works out the way it ought to, especially in war. In order not to be left the loser, you must try with your last strength to achieve the objective, to fight to the last possibility against the cunning force of circumstances, otherwise you ruin the venture and you're finished. In general, war is ruthless with everyone, but the first to be killed at the front is the coward, the very one who fears for his life more than anybody. Enough of the brave perish too, however. War is amazingly blind about people and certainly doesn't dispose of their lives according to merit. Treacherous and capricious as never in peacetime is the fate of a man who, in order to

survive, must not let the tight reins of circumstances out of his hands for a single moment; he must try to stay in control of them under the most impossible conditions.

Ivanovsky could not get the bitterness of the first and rather stupid loss out of his mind. He would forget about it, absorbed in the worries of the night, but not for long. It would come back again, that nagging pain only too familiar in war. However much he might have suffered from that heart-rending pain during the last five months and however commonplace he might know it to be, he could never become entirely inured to it. He had lost so many during the war that it was time he got used to such losses and learned to accept their inevitability. But however accustomed he became to them, he would suddenly fall prey to such despair that it might have been better if he had stopped that fatal bullet with his own head, however precious it might be to him, than consign to the grave forever someone so dear to him.

He had not even been able to bury his best friend, captain of scouts Volokh. They simply had no spade and the necessary fifteen minutes; the Germans were already racing up from the highway on their motorcycles. As they fired back, he and Pogrebnyak wrapped the captain's body in a groundsheet and hastily covered it with a mixture of snow and leaves. And so their commander was left on the fringe of the forest in the Smolensk country. They did not even succeed in carrying the next one, Sergeant Rukavitsyn, from the hill on which the bullet got him. Ten minutes later, he was picked up there by the Germans.

In general, Ivanovsky had known some fine people in the war, and his best luck was, of course, Captain Volokh. With some kind of inexplicable instinct, the lieutenant realized it immediately he saw him through the slight morning mist in the fire-lane in Borovsky Forest. The captain was kneeling on the ground and shaking something out of his pockets into a peaked cap on the moss. Nearby lay a folded map. His scouts were sitting and lying round him. All were wearing green camouflage suits with the hoods down and forage-caps on their heads; only the captain had a peaked cap. From this, the lieutenant assumed that he was the commander. He went up and saluted.

"Comrade Commander, permission to speak!"

"Certainly," smiled the captain without a trace of the commander's strictness. "Especially if there's something to speak about. All we've got here is dust."

He was clearly not above joking and perhaps even treating others to tobacco; but all his tobacco was used up, like the lieutenant's. True, this was no time for smoking; the lieutenant would have been gladder of a biscuit or a slice of bread, since he had hardly eaten for two days. After the fiasco in the night battle near

Kruptsy, he had lost his regiment and had ended up in encirclement. On getting out of it again, he had wandered with twelve soldiers through the forests in search of his unit. But he couldn't find the remnants of his regiment or even of the division anywhere. They sometimes ran into soldiers from other units, but no one knew anything; there was confusion in the front-line zone and our own troops were getting mixed up with the Germans. A day later, there were only Germans around. He kept running into them everywhere or stumbling on fresh traces of their presence and for a week he blundered through the woods in search of a way out. He had no map and the situation was not at all clear; the soldiers he met on the way gave him the most confusing information. One thing was clear, however: our troops had retreated a long way and the Germans were heading fast for Moscow. In a few chance clashes, he lost three more men; two disappeared in the night; they may have lost their way in the dark and joined other groups, or worse. He only had four left with him; they had wandered into some God-forsaken part of the forest where there were neither Germans nor our own troops. Then, suddenly, that chance meeting with a group of army scouts in the fire-lane.

The captain nevertheless shook something out of his pockets and rolled a short, thin cigarette. The others, as it seemed to the lieutenant, watched their commander in silence and with concealed sadness.

"How's the lighter—in one piece?" asked the captain, thrusting his pocket linings back into his breeches.

"What lighter?" asked Ivanovsky in surprise.

Suddenly, it all came back to Ivanovsky.

A month before, near Kasachevo, where they had been stationed on the defensive, the regimental reconnaissance chief had brought to the battery observation post before dawn a commander wearing a peaked cap and the Order of the Red Banner on his gabardine tunic. As soon as it was dawn, they had begun studying something on the German side through the stereotelescope and making marks on a map. Then they had breakfasted together. The captain had treated Ivanovsky to a Kazbek cigarette, and, while lighting up, had noticed his captured lighter; it was a model of a Buddhist monk. At a slight pressure on a spring, part of the monk's cranium flew back and a flame shot up.

The lighter was in one piece. Ivanovsky took out the little black figure and pressed the spring with his thumb. This time there was no flame. The fuel was evidently dry.

"Amusing, amusing," said the captain. "Pity we haven't anything to light."

"We haven't got a grain amongst us either."

They both turned serious. The captain pulled the torn jacket

tighter round his shoulders. The cheerless reality of the front line had suddenly intruded on them.

"Been in trouble long?" asked the captain.

"Since the seventeenth. They clobbered us near Kasachevo."

"I see. Well, let's go on together. There's a link-up in the lines marked on my map. Let's try and get through there."

They pushed on for another four days and nights, but did not find any link-up in the German front line nor, incidentally, did they find the front. It was late autumn, the leaves had all fallen from the trees and early frosts had set in after the cold and the rains. The roads were choked with the horses and carts, cars and cross-country vehicles of the German advancing and rear units. The men were exhausted with hunger and with many days on the march through the mud. Some of them began to suffer from fevers and coughs. The lieutenant was constantly tormented by boils all over his body. Then one of the scouts in the group was wounded in the leg. He could not walk unaided and they took turns to carry him on a stretcher improvised from poles and a groundsheet. For this reason, they could not move fast, but the commander did not want to leave the scout behind. He was truly indispensable, a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired athlete named Fikh who spoke fluent German. He had been wounded by chance in the daytime when they dropped into a village to ask the way and get some food and had run into Germans at the very beginning of the street. The captain brought down with a knife in the neck the first German to come out of the house. He was an officer, and Volokh, with the usual habit of the scout, seized his map-case first of all. Unfortunately, two more Germans came out after the officer. One of them fired a pistol and hit Fikh in the thigh. Balayenko gave a burst, the German fell, and they all made their getaway, picking up the wounded man, who could not walk any more. The enemy bullet had evidently hit a vital nerve, since his leg was useless. Moreover, some kind of complication set in and he began running a fever. The long journey caused the wounded man terrible suffering, the dressing kept slipping all the time and the wound bled. Fikh suffered uncomplainingly, becoming increasingly gloomy and withdrawn.

They once stopped for a rest on a hill topped by an oak-grove. The forest was already stripped bare; only the stunted, curly little oak-trees still rustled in the wind their foliage, now very dry but as dense as in summer. It was relatively quiet here; the oak-grove gave them shelter from enemy eyes. As soon as they stopped, the scouts fell to the ground. Fikh lay on his stretcher with a look of silent detachment on his haggard face. Volokh sat nearby and thoughtfully picked at his teeth with a straw. There was nothing to eat or smoke. Two scouts went off in search of a house to get a piece of

bread for the wounded man.

"Listen, Fikh," said the captain suddenly, "don't worry, we're not going to leave you. We'll carry you, and everything'll be fine. The main thing is not to lose heart."

"Give me back my pistol," said Fikh haltingly in a weak voice.

For two days running he had incessantly been asking for his pistol, which Volokh, suspicious of his intentions, had removed from its holster. Every conversation with the wounded man now began and ended with the same request.

"There you are, after your own again! I'll return it to you. But first we've got to get you back to our own people."

"Give me back my pistol! Why did you take it? Why all the worry? To justify your conscience? To hell with that, Captain..."

There was no talking him out of it. The captain realized this and made a point of not trying to. Their predicament left no room for illusions, and they did not need any illusions anyway. The hopelessness of Fikh's condition was obvious to him and to all eight men in the group, including his old friend, Sergeant Rukavitsyn, who had been looking after the wounded man as much as was possible during the journey. The trouble was, however, that his possibilities were very limited. Fikh was fading away before his eyes and Rukavitsyn couldn't really do anything to help. He sat dejectedly by his comrade, constantly wiping the cold perspiration from the wounded man's pale face with a grubby handkerchief.

"Ye-e-s, it's a problem," said the captain. "What are we going to do with you?"

The question was almost rhetorical; no one was able or tried to answer it. In any case, the captain wasn't even expecting an answer, he was simply thinking aloud. He did not have long to reflect this time; two of the scouts returned and reported that there were no villages anywhere and a guard-hut discovered in the vicinity was empty; nothing edible had been found there. On the way back, however, they had seen loaded German lorries going one after another into a neighbouring wood; they were being unloaded in there and were returning empty by the same road. By all indications, a big German dump was being moved into the forest.

They knew, of course, that there could be dumps of various things–fodder, ammunition, fuel, dry goods, engineering equipment or even chemicals. But there could also be food. It was possibly the last that seemed most likely to the starving men, and the captain jumped briskly to his feet.

"Where is it? Far?"

"A couple of kilometres from here."

They moved off and went quickly through the oak-grove, then skirted a gully, crossed a wet meadow and went into some dense,

prickly bushes. As they were coming out of these, Volokh gave a command and all froze immediately. They could see heavily loaded seven-ton lorries lumbering along a rutted road into a sparse pinewood. They were being unloaded in there and were quickly coming down again, no doubt for another load.

The captain promptly sat down on the spot and took his binoculars out of his blouse. The scouts put Fikh down on his stretcher.

"My word, look at that pile! That's something!" said the captain in amazement. "They're laying wire round it. But the approaches are good, on the whole. When it gets dark, we could... Here, have a look," he said, handing the binoculars to Ivanovsky. The lieutenant found a gap in the bare branches and aimed the binoculars at the wood. He could clearly see the lorries being unloaded there. The work was evidently being done by prisoners-of-war– some distance from them stood soldiers in long greatcoats with rifles in their hands. Under the tall, sparse pines on the hill lay long rows of bulky green and yellow cases. Some of the stacks built up earlier had been covered with tarpaulin.

"I wonder what that is?" said the captain. "Never mind. We'll put on a firework display for the whole of the Smolensk Region to marvel at. Rukavitsyn, is that antitank grenade of yours in one piece? Good. And you haven't ditched the TNT yet, have you, Pogrebnyak? We must get the flares ready too. They'll come in handy."

There and then, in the alder-grove, he rapidly outlined his plan to attack the dump and allocated the duties among his handful of tired and hungry men. He entrusted the care of the wounded man to two soldiers, but then on second thoughts to Rukavitsyn only. Ivanovsky he appointed his second-in-command. He decided to attack as soon as it turned dark.

"It's going to be a merry night!" said the captain delightedly. "I wouldn't mind a smoke now, but we haven't got anything."

Chapter Three

It would probably be best to blow it up. Pull the charge under the barbed wire with a fuse attached and put it under one of the stack of boxes. Lure the sentry away somehow. Ivanovsky knew how to do that; he had once been taught by Captain Volokh. There were several methods. The best, of course, would be to get rid of the sentry altogether, but if it was a big objective, there would be a number of sentries and you couldn't pick them all off.

So thinking, Ivanovsky skied slowly down from the top of the

hill, which was invisible in the night. In the snowy darkness, there was no telling a hill from a gully: he could only feel it by the weight of the skis under his feet, which either suddenly grew heavier so that he had to use the sticks, or glided more easily over the snow. Ivanovsky was heading due south all this time, only occasionally checking his direction by compass. On the right, in the misty gloom, now approaching the ski-trail, now moving away from it, wound a little stream which he recognized by the irregular line of bushes along the bank. Some low hills ended to the left of it, and the skiers had to cross them from time to time.

After coming down the latest smooth slope, Ivanovsky stopped. His skis had begun cracking in dry weeds of some kind and the lieutenant was careful to avoid them. One at a time, his men drew up and stopped behind him.

"How's it going?" he asked in his full voice. No one could hear them now.

"We've warmed ourselves up, Lieutenant," answered Lukashov, breathing heavily as he skied up; white steam, conspicuous even in the night, was billowing from his heavy form. Sudnik grabbed a handful of snow and, leaning on one of his sticks, began eating it greedily. Khakimov and Krasnokutsky glided up soon after. Someone else was descending the slope.

"Dyubin!" called the lieutenant.

"He seems to be coming," said a voice from the dark after a pause. Ivanovsky assumed that if the last man was here, it meant they were all together and could move.

"How about a rest, Comrade Commander?" asked Krasnokutsky with a note of complaint in his voice.

Ivanovsky took out his clock. The big hand was approaching twelve, the small one had already reached one.

"Cancel the rest," said the lieutenant. "We're late."

"We're so tired we're shaking."

"Keep on the ball, then it'll come easier. Follow me!"

He was afraid of the men's enthusiasm cooking off while they rested; he knew how hard it was to recover the former pace after a halt. It was important to maintain the set speed all through the night, perhaps even increase it if necessary. He knew that they would soon get their second wind and then it would be easier for everybody.

But tiredness was taking its toll, and the lieutenant began to notice more and more often that his gaze was stubbornly turning downwards and the points of his skis began to alternate hypnotically in front of his eyes. Once, tearing his gaze away from the snow with an effort and throwing back his head, he saw ahead of him something murkily grey, like the high wall of a forest. It was, in fact, a forest barring their way; the tall pines whispered uneasily

and languidly in the wind. Ivanovsky was surprised; there was no forest marked on the map hereabouts, least of all an evergreen one. He thought for a moment that perhaps he had lost his direction and hastily checked with his compass. But no, all was correct, he was keeping to the right course—precisely two hundred and ten degrees. But why the forest? What was he to do about it: head straight through without changing direction, or go round it? And which side should he go round?

"A smoke, Lieutenant?" asked Lukashov behind him. For some reason he had come up before Sudnik, who had fallen back and could hardly be seen in the dark. This was a violation of their set order on the march.

"What are you doing here?" snapped Ivanovsky.

"That sapper... Got fed up treading on his heels."

His skiers had apparently begun to straggle, and that was no use at all. The lieutenant had assumed that they would make a better job of it on a freshly-made ski-trail. He put the compass away in his sleeve and, thinking hard about how to cope with the forest, waited for the rest to come up.

Five or even ten minutes later, Khakimov and Krasnokutsky appeared, but without the others. His patience beginning to wear thin, he waited. No sooner had the weary skiers halted, than they leaned their chests on the tops of their sticks. In this way they rested. Breathing heavily and spasmodically, they all scooped up handfuls of snow.

"Will it be soon, Comrade Lieutenant?" asked Krasnokutsky in a dying voice. "I'm done in..."

"Where are the rest?" demanded the lieutenant in alarm instead of replying.

"They're coming. Zayats has fallen back, I think. The sergeant-major's looking after him."

"And Pivovarov?"

"Here's someone now."

Another white ghost glided out of the snowy darkness. It was Pivovarov.

"Where are the rest?" asked the lieutenant.

"I don't know. There doesn't seem to be anybody behind," answered the soldier briskly. "I stopped to fix my ski fasteners."

"All right. Let's go."

The lieutenant couldn't wait any longer. The sergeant-major was no novice in such matters and he ought to catch up. Moreover, the worn ski-trail was clearly visible on the snow; let him catch up. The lieutenant turned right along the fringe of the pine-forest in order to skirt round it. He had decided not to go straight through to avoid blundering into a gully or fallen trees, or simply getting stuck in the thickets. In any case, it was no use skiing through a forest at night.

He did not know how to get round it, however, and skied haphazardly along the irregular, winding fringe, so that the ski-trail followed all its intricate convolutions. They were proceeding much more cautiously than in the open field; he kept imagining he could see the shapes of people beneath the pines in the undergrowth. But as he drew nearer, he always discovered that they were young pines.

Meanwhile, the wind was rising and was now blowing almost directly in their faces. The fine material of the camouflage blouse billowed out on his back, sometimes flapping like a sail. The lieutenant felt that his energy was running out and, with it, his confidence that he was heading in the right direction. He had no doubts about the rest. Now he would put on a burst of speed, now he would slow down to a steady pace, looking to either side with more than the necessary caution. From time to time he listened to the noises behind, trying to ascertain whether the dilatory Zayats and Dyubin were catching up.

But Dyubin still hadn't appeared, and the forest suddenly came to an end. They had finally reached its western extremity. From there, the coniferous fringe turned to the south and receded somewhere to the south-east. It was just what Ivanovsky had been expecting. He even sighed with relief, halted and rammed his sticks into the snow. He must get his bearings from the map.

"Have you got a groundsheet, Pivovarov?"

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant."

"Let me have it."

Without getting off his skis, Ivanovsky crouched down on the snow. Pivovarov carefully covered him with his groundsheet, and it became intensely dark and quiet after the fleeting whiteness of the snow. The lieutenant ran the feeble patch of light from a torch over the crumpled map. Everything became clear.

The river here followed a sweeping curve, which was why he had lost it in the darkness and had come up against the forest. But it was doubtful if there was any need to cater to the river's caprice; it would be more sensible to head due south and thus make a short cut. True, without the river it would be more difficult for him to get his bearings in the dark, the more so since the map was inaccurate. The pine-forest which they had just skirted was not indicated on it at all; the topographers had simply marked a few little rings to indicate bushes. They may indeed once have been bushes, but now look what a forest had shot up in the meantime! A good two kilometres in length, it had nearly led him astray.

Realizing where he was, the lieutenant threw off the groundsheet.

"No Sergeant-Major?"

"Not yet. Shall we wait?" asked Lukashov.

Intently, hoping against hope, Ivanovsky peered into the dark and listened, but there was nobody coming up behind. He was beginning to be seriously alarmed by the sergeant-major's prolonged absence and various unpleasant conjectures crossed his mind; but he dismissed them, clinging to his certainty that Dyubin would catch them up. They must now move further ahead and he needed someone to bring up the rear... The senior in rank in the group after the commander was Sergeant Lukashov, and the lieutenant made his decision.

"Lukashov, you'll bring up the rear. And no lagging behind! Understand?"

"Yes," replied the sergeant firmly, stepping off the ski-trail to let the others pass.

"Forward! Another couple of spurts and we'll be there."

...They had almost reached their goal on that other occasion too.

It was not yet dark when the damp snow began falling on the moist ground. It was quiet. At first, the snow was thin and fluffy; the beautiful, lacy snowflakes whirled picturesquely in mid-air and settled smoothly on the ground. Then the snow began to fall more heavily and by evening wet flakes were coming down thick and fast, sticking to the branches of the trees and plastering the men's heads, shoulders and sleeves. The scouts sat patiently in the bushes and waited. After several hours of immobility, all were frozen stiff. The wounded Fikh was covered with a wet groundsheet and he lay there unconscious, groaning quietly. Before dusk, Volokh and another scout, Sergeant Balayenko, went off to reconnoitre the dump; there was little to be seen from the bushes now.

A quarter of an hour later, a breathless Balayenko ran up to the group. The captain had ordered that Fikh and one scout should be left in the oak-grove and the others were to move out to the fringe. They jumped up and soon reached their commander. The dump was only a short distance away, but the snowfall and the onset of dusk provided good cover for the men. The captain firmly announced that they would begin the operation there and then, without waiting for nightfall, while the vigilance of the sentries was still weakened by the day's activity, which had not yet subsided. No one raised any objections to the commander. The scouts listened to his every word and obeyed his instructions to the letter and in silence. To Ivanovsky, everything was still new and unfamiliar in this raid; he was relying entirely on the captain and was also trying to carry out his orders as efficiently as possible.

"The snow came just at the right time," said the lieutenant, settling himself down near Volokh.

Volokh turned to him with a dissatisfied and worried look on his face.

"Not really. They can't see us, but we can't see a damn thing either."

It was hard to tell whether it was better with or without it snowing; however, the snow did not ease off and the captain decided to act. Four men with a captured machine gun were left under Ivanovsky on the fringe with orders to give cover in the event of an unsuccessful withdrawal. He himself, with two scouts, picked up the grenades and set off for the grove. There were no farewells; Ivanovsky simply watched them go with a lingering gaze until all three had vanished one after another into the deepening, shimmering dusk. He quietly loaded the machine gun and waited on the fringe of the grove.

For some time it was dark and quiet in front; the minutes of troubled, tense waiting dragged tediously by. In his mind's eye, Ivanovsky was following the captain, vividly imagining him crossing the open sector of field and approaching the fringe of the grove. No doubt he would stop next to have a look round. But what was that?..

A strange cry and then another came suddenly out the windy, snowy darkness, and before Ivanovsky could figure out what it was, all doubts were banished when a rifle shot barked close by. A flare soared over the pine-tops but illumined little on the white earth—the snowfall had thickly blanketed the open spaces of the night; but Ivanovsky realized that the captain's plan had misfired.

He probably ought to cover their retreat and perhaps draw the fire on himself, but he did not know where the captain was and why he had not answered the fire of the sentries with so much as a single shot. However, when machine-gun tracers came flying from somewhere near the road along the fringe of the grove, he could not hold out any longer and fired at random towards the point in the darkness from which those shining tracers were coming. He waited impatiently for Volokh to show up and fired only one burst at the German gunner; their ammunition was low, there was only one belt, and he must economize. He was waiting for three familiar silhouettes to loom out of the darkness at any moment, and then they could get away from this damned ammunition dump. But the minutes passed, no one came running out of the darkness, and the lieutenant had to wait. Tolkachyov was lying next to him in the snow. Ivanovsky called him, and waved on towards the grove. The man jumped up and obediently ran into the snow-covered field.

Flares were burning endlessly above the grove and the tracers from the flank were flying to a definite target; the German ma-

chine gunner probably knew where to shoot. Ivanovsky, kneeling, let fly another burst at random, and the whole of the not so distant fringe of the grove erupted in fire—it looked as though the guards had taken up a defensive position and were beating off an attack in earnest. They must retreat without delay. Still there was no captain, however, and Ivanovsky felt sick with foreboding.

He suddenly spotted someone appear in the field; by the wavering light of a flare, an unsteady shade flitted through the snow in front; as the flare fell, the shade momentarily grew to gigantic proportions, as big as the whole field; machine-gun tracer was flying past it on both sides on its way to the fringe. In a few bounds, however, the shade reached the fringe and through the noise of firing Ivanovsky heard: "The captain's been killed."

"Stop!" he shouted, jumping to his feet. "Stop!"

It was Fartuchny, not a bad scout, on the whole, and perhaps Captain Volokh's favourite. But now, in the grip of incomprehensible fear, he was dashing out of the fire at break-neck speed. The news of the disaster could not shake the lieutenant, however; he had been expecting the worst, although he could not even have imagined that Captain Volokh would be killed.

"Stop! Go back!"

Snatching up the machine gun with its heavy belt dangling down to the snow, he ran into the field. He slithered over the snow-dusted, rough terrain, running towards the point from which Fartuchny had appeared. Without looking round, he knew that Fartuchny would return and run after him; it could not be otherwise. The flares seemed to be shining from all directions. Ivanovsky was not hiding from them any more and, after a short stop, he let fly a long burst at the fringe of the grove to alert the Germans and make them take cover. At that moment, Fartuchny nimbly overtook him and instantly vanished behind the curtain of snow.

Ivanovsky also jumped from his knees to run after the soldier, but by the light of a flare that blazed up over the field, he saw several shadows quite close which, bent double, were running from the road along the wire fence of the dump. Frightened that they might cut off Fartuchny, he hurriedly let them have his last burst and when the empty end of the metal belt was ejected on to the snow, threw down the now useless machine gun and snatched the pistol out of its holster. But he could already see his own men, two of them bent over and dragging along the third with an effort. He ran up to them.

"Alive?"

"No! Dead!" shouted Fartuchny. "Blasted sentry! Just our luck..."

Firing back, they changed direction and ran through the bushes for some time. Only after covering about three kilometres did they

stop for breath in a wood. The captain had been shot dead at point-blank range. There was no sense in taking him with them, and they hastily dug up the wet, leafy earth with their knives, made a small pit and buried the commander in it. They also lost one of the scouts who went with Volokh; they did not know whether he had been killed back there too, or whether he had escaped in some other direction. They could not wait, however; pursuers could show up behind them any moment, and to escape them with the wounded Fikh would be no joke.

Cursing the ill-omened ammunition dump and their bad luck that day, Ivanovsky led the small group northwards, away from the fateful grove, ablaze with flares whose glow accompanied the soldiers for a long time. The lieutenant was feeling sick at heart, with spells of bitterness and despair. No, he was not blaming the captain. No doubt he would have acted the same way himself in his place. But he was hurt almost to tears that blind, stupid chance had helped the Germans so effectively. If Volokh had not run into a sentry during the snowfall, it would have been a very different story.

This meant that they must be more careful. They must be a hundred times more vigilant, especially Ivanovsky himself who was now also responsible for others...

Chapter Four

After they had passed the forest, the lieutenant again led the group to a level flood plain by the river, and for a long time the weary skiers kept going in a straight line without any turns anywhere. There were no upward or downward slopes any more, the ski-trail ran level over deep snow, and Ivanovsky had to work hard with his sticks. The skis sank deeper in the soft snow than was suitable for speed and it was tough going. By cutting the ski-trail, the commander had taken on himself the heaviest job on this trip, and somewhere toward midnight he felt himself beginning to run out of steam. All his clothing was wet, his underlinen was also soaking because of the sweat, his hot breath was tearing his chest apart and he was beginning to feel thirsty. But he did not want to eat snow; he knew that the moisture would cause extra perspiration, and this would in no way add to the strength that he was going to need so badly.

The time was passing quickly, but Dyubin had still not caught up with the group, and the lieutenant lost himself in conjectures. What had happened to him? But he must clearly stop thinking about him; if he had not caught up earlier, then he wasn't going to do so now. They had covered half the route, if not more. The lieu-

tenant winced every time at the thought that their numbers were diminishing. They had not reached their destination, but four had been lost already. He could not waste time searching or waiting and he simply had no right to do so.

Ivanovsky was deliberately consulting his clock less frequently; he had begun to fear the relentless passage of time and was putting all his energy into skiing, trying not to be distracted by anything else. No doubt it was for this reason that he somehow failed to notice at first that the wind had risen considerably, ground snow was whirling at his feet and it looked as if it was beginning to snow. One or two violent gusts of wind blasted their snowy meal into his face so hard that the lieutenant gasped for breath. It became darker and quieter all round. Moreover, the narrow space of night was narrowing even further, was dissolving into grey, inclement twilight. The nocturnal patches on either side were diminishing noticeably. The wind blasted his face with snow again; it looked like the beginning of a blizzard. "Bad timing," thought the lieutenant in alarm, plying his sticks more energetically. His skis were sinking right down in the snow, only the upcurved points showing. Trying to hold his course, Ivanovsky was hardly looking down; he had to see as far as possible into the night, it was one of his main duties as the leader. The others were keeping a watch to the sides: Lukashov, coming last, was responsible for security in the rear. Needless to say, in this darkness it would have been easy to blunder into the Germans; but he feared being late more than a chance encounter with them. Snowstorm or calm weather, they had to be at their destination by morning, while it was still dark. There was nothing for them to do in the daytime.

The river had now veered away again, and there was something grey and enormous in front of them, an irregular, misty hump looming up out of the darkness. The blizzard was now rampaging over the field and it was impossible to make out what the thing was. In any case, it was right on the group's path. Ivanovsky grasped that at once. He was now consulting the compass more frequently than before and checking the route. Sudnik was only just behind him, and the others were also keeping close.

What had attracted their attention at a distance proved close up to be some kind of building, the end house of a village or a farmstead. It was a temptation to drop in there, if only for a drink of water, but Ivanovsky, realizing what was ahead of them, promptly set course to steer clear of it. He was superstitiously afraid of wasting time on anything that could distract them from their main goal.

It was hard to determine through the blizzard how far away this farm was. For about a minute it was a dark shape on one side and was already disappearing, when the sound of a cry came

through the snowstorm. The lieutenant could not at first understand who was shouting or in what language, but then the barking of dogs came from the building. Expecting the worst, Ivanovsky pushed off hard with his sticks, veering sharply away, and the windy silence of the night was immediately rent by a snow-muffled burst of machine-gun fire. The tracers stitched the twilight overhead, screeched over the snow and flew off. Trembling with shock, the lieutenant bent down and dashed ahead with all his might into the darkness. A light suddenly blazed in the blizzard; the snowflakes turned densely white in its fuzzy radiance. This was no flare; more likely headlamps switched on somewhere. And again the fiery sheaves of bullets shot past in the air, a dense, long burst scattering widely over the field. The lieutenant looked round at the skiers; Sudnik, as before, was keeping close behind; the others were coming up after him, their shoulders bowed. The none-too-bright distant glow of the headlamps was nevertheless lighting up the field and picking out the white silhouettes of the men from the grey murk. They could probably be seen from the farm. When the tracers flashed past very near them, he ordered "Get down!" in a low voice, worried above all about Sudnik's load, and fell softly on to his side. But he was too late. Lying in the snow, he knew that he had been hit; his leg had been stung above the knee and a warm wetness was beginning to seep through his trousers. He did not feel any particular pain, however. Gritting his teeth, he drew his leg up—it seemed tolerable. Beside him, breathing heavily, Sudnik had pressed himself down into the snow.

"The bottles! Mind the bottles!" he whispered distinctly, again realizing with exceptional lucidity that if the Germans hit those, they were all done for. Still in a lying position, Sudnik pulled the pack off his back and pushed it down into the snow, covering the dangerous burden with his body.

They lay dead still in the snow for a quarter of an hour.

As soon as the tracers died down, the lieutenant made an effort to jump to his feet and, to his joy, discovered that his leg obeyed him. Stooping over his skis, he pushed off into the dark with all his might away from the machine-gun fire and the dazzling light of the headlamps. Good! The gusts of wind and snow were nevertheless concealing them even in the space illumined by the distant lights, and he shot ahead another hundred metres or so. The farm was no longer visible, the lights winked in the distance and dimmed, but still shone in their direction. Another burst of fire rent the darkness behind, but the tracers were wide of the mark.

It looked as though they had escaped from the most dangerous area. The lieutenant suddenly realized that he had become separated from the men and looked round. Someone behind was moving along hesitantly in the semidarkness but was not overtaking

him—they had evidently lost the ski-trail. Then he braked his skis, crouched down and, quietly calling the soldier, glided off more slowly into the darkness, away from that confounded farmstead.

He soon came to the fringe of a forest or some bushes and halted. He must get the men together. His leg was giving him more pain, but it was bearable for the time being; it was evidently only a flesh wound. The farmstead was silent. Right beside him were dark, bare snow-sprinkled bushes above which loomed the black shapes of young fir-trees—if anything happened they could take cover in those. Ivanovsky never ceased to marvel at the vigilance of the Germans. Although he had apparently been spotted by the dogs. Stupid hounds, did they know who they were barking at? Incidentally, it would have been worse if he had not turned away from that farmstead in time. They had nevertheless skirted round it, although evidently not widely enough, to remain unnoticed. Now what were they to do? He could feel the growing pain in his leg, his breeches were soaking wet and so was the cloth round his foot. He must bandage it up. But he said nothing and did not carry on, but waited for the rest to catch up.

The first to plunge unexpectedly out of the darkness was Sudnik, then Pivovarov's slim figure appeared; a little later, stooping and vigorously plying their sticks, two more raced up out of the blizzard. All stopped near the commander and looked warily back over their shoulders. The gusty wind was whirling the thin, flying snow through the air and dusting the men's skis, camouflage suits and faces.

"Who's still missing?" asked the lieutenant quietly.

"Khakimov," said Lukashov without turning. All were staring back in the direction of the ill-omened farmstead.

"The scum! How did they scent us? We were going so quietly," swore Krasnokutsky.

"That's another disaster—those dogs. And they weren't German either, they were ours, Russian."

"All dogs are German under the Germans. They're not our friends any more here."

The lieutenant was having a job to stay on his feet, keeping his weight off his wounded leg, conscious of his predicament and worried about Khakimov's prolonged absence. It was perfectly obvious that this delay would cost them dear, but he could not abandon the soldier.

"Where did he disappear?" asked the lieutenant after waiting a short while. "When we were lying down, or was he hit afterwards?"

"He was there when we were lying down. But there's no knowing what happened afterwards."

"Go and find him. We'll wait here."

Lukashov moved off into the blizzard in silence. Ivanovsky

stood there for a while, then turned off into the fringe of the wood and went behind the young, snow-sprinkled firs. It was being in a wind tunnel; clouds of snow were whirling round in the dark and the wind was blowing from all sides. The lieutenant quickly untied the laces of his camouflage suit and unfastened his trousers. His cold hands immediately felt the congealed blood. He tore off the rustling wrapper of the wound dressing and bandaged his leg tightly above the knee. It was unbearably painful, but he stuck it out, suppressed a gasp and got dressed again. He carefully wiped his hands with snow; no one must notice that he had been hit. It would be pointless, especially since the wound was nothing to speak of. He would have to suffer in silence.

The devil, what a mess it had been, a really bad one! He suddenly recalled a saying that if something starts badly, it will end even worse. It couldn't have begun worse with him. What was the end going to be like?

The soldiers waited patiently on the snow, clutching their bandaged rifle barrels in their hands. He also waited awhile and then took out his clock. It was doing its job like nobody's business, its hands indicating half past two. Most of the night had elapsed already. They had covered a fair distance too, but they still had about another twenty kilometres to go. As long as he didn't lose his bearings. Dodging out of the way under fire back there, he had not been thinking about direction at all.

He checked with the compass. The hairline, set at two hundred and ten degrees, pointed at the bushes. It was impossible to see a thing in the darkness and the snowstorm, and he decided that he would have to make his way through the bushes, otherwise they would end up in the clutches of the Germans.

"Tss!"

A faint, indistinct voice came out of the darkness. Krasnokutsky rose to his feet, stooped and moved off somewhere. Nothing was heard from his direction for over five minutes, then something white and cumbersome glimmered and moved about in the dark. Of course, two of them, bent over, were pulling Khakimov along.

All immediately jumped to their feet and seized their sticks. But no help was needed now: Lukashov and Krasnokutsky pulled Khakimov up and sank to their knees in the snow.

"Here he is," said Lukashov, breathing heavily. "Nearly missed him. One stick was stuck there. His. I looked and saw it. He was ten paces off. Already being covered by the snow."

"Is he alive?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes, but he's in a bad way. Hit in the back. And the stomach too, by the look of it."

Things were getting worse every hour. Another one! Poor Khakimov! Such a painstaking, conscientious lad. The commander had

liked him from the first–taciturn and intelligent. But what could they do with him now?

"I bandaged him here a bit over his vest. He's unconscious..."

While the two were busy in the snow bandaging the wounded man, Ivanovsky, keeping the weight off his wounded leg, stared abstractedly into the darkness. Of course they'd have to take Khakimov with them. But how? And for how long? And what was to be done with him tomorrow? Everything was difficult, uncertain and ominous, but the lieutenant tried not to let it show that he was in a quandary. In the mission on which they were going, he had to know everything, be capable of everything and be the personification of absolute confidence for the others.

"So, you've bandaged him? Make a sledge with his skis. What, you don't know how? Pivovarov, give me a groundsheet," ordered the lieutenant with forced briskness.

"Can we pull him out of it like that?" asked Krasnokutsky doubtfully.

"We can. Take the sling off the rifle. Someone give me his belt. Take off all his straps too. Collect up the cartridges. The lot, the lot. And the grenades too. Sudnik, take the grenades. Now the two of you take him together. One holds the strap like that. Pivovarov, cover from the rear. More boldly, more boldly, don't be scared."

After putting the wounded man down on the skis, they drew him towards the fringe of the wood. The going wasn't so easy, it was awkward and unsteady; the skis slid apart on the snow and the body of the wounded man kept trying to roll over on to one side all the time. A deep furrow was left in the snow behind them. There was no knowing how far they could tow him this way.

But they had no option. They couldn't go back to their own troops from there, and there was nowhere to leave him. Of course, they would have to muddle through. They would hardly make it by morning now.

They went hesitantly into the bushes. Now and again they stopped and straightened the skis, barely managing to keep Khakimov on them. Krasnokutsky was pulling; Pivovarov, bent double, was pushing and supporting. Lukashov, in the rear, helped from time to time, quietly urging the other two on. Looking back now and again, the lieutenant pushed on ahead...

Fortunately, the bushes didn't take them into a forest, as Ivanovsky had feared, and half an hour later they found themselves out in the open again. The wind was stronger there and the snow was skimming over the ground. Covered in snow from head to foot, they got out into the open and halted to recover their breath.

"So what are we going to do, Lieutenant?" Lukashov, worried, straightened up behind. "Are we to go on towing him like this?"

"What else can we do? What do you suggest?" asked the lieutenant with ill-concealed irritation.

"Perhaps we could leave him somewhere. In a village, maybe. Or in a barn."

"No, we shan't leave him," said Ivanovsky firmly. "Perish the thought."

"If it's no, then it's no," agreed Lukashov suddenly. "But are we going to get far like this?"

"We've got to move faster," said the lieutenant agitatedly. "As fast as we humanly can! Got that?"

Without looking back and limping noticeably on his right foot, he set off into the dark. The rest skied off after him.

All maintained a dejected and weary silence.

Chapter Five

The former tempo of that mad race had been irrevocably lost; they wandered for hours through the blizzard like drowsy flies and the lieutenant was solely concerned not to lose direction. Now and again he stopped; he had to check with the compass and wait for the sledge carrying Khakimov. Krasnokutsky and Pivovarov were using up the last of their strength. The lieutenant himself was reeling with fatigue; his head whirled drunkenly because of the wind, his gun weighed heavy on his shoulder and his leg was hurting more and more. But he pressed on, and Sudnik, to his amazement, did not fall behind him. The man was unbelievably burdened; apart from his bottles, he was carrying Khakimov's three 1-kg grenades, his rifle, which they had decided not to discard, and his pack.

In the darkness, a small, snowed-up hayrick turned up ahead of them, and the lieutenant turned off the route and a minute later wearily pushed his shoulder into the hay, dusted with snow but smelling as before of summer and sunshine. His feet on their skis had somehow slipped to one side and he let his body slide into the snow-dusted rick. For several seconds, he lay deliciously inert, closing his eyes while everything under him seemed to begin spinning round in a kind of sleepy, mindless rotation. Frightened that he might fall asleep at once, he made a huge effort of will and forced himself to stand up. No one, apparently, had noticed that spell of weakness, of which he felt deeply ashamed at that moment. Meanwhile Sudnik came up to the hayrick, and the groundsheet with Khakimov on it was towed up. The last to emerge wearily from the twilight was Lukashov. All silently fell down under the rick.

"Is it much further to go?" said the last man with an effort.

"A little, a little," said the lieutenant with forced cheerfulness. "But we've got to hurry. There's a main road there and we've got to cross it before dawn. We won't make it by day."

"Clear and understood," said Lukashov, "so let's get a move on."

"Yes, we've got to go," confirmed the lieutenant, but he was unable to summon up the strength to detach himself from the soft side of the rick.

"Come on, start pulling the sledge, one, two!" commanded Lukashov, and, not for the first time, the lieutenant mentally noted that this sergeant was beginning to give the orders to the group with more and more assurance. He had been shouting at the others on the way, egging them on and giving instructions. Preoccupied with keeping his bearings and observing the terrain in front, Ivanovsky had not yet even wondered whether this was a good thing. Incidentally, as the man bringing up the rear, the sergeant suited him down to the ground. He was excellent at it, and no one was likely to fall back with a man like that there.

"Right, on your feet, on your feet!" urged Lukashov quietly and with his customary insistence, himself already upright on his skis and ready to move off. Krasnokutsky got up with an obvious effort and slung the strap of the sledge over his shoulder. Only Pivovarov remained seated, leaning sideways against the rick and not moving.

"What's the matter with you? Waiting for a special invitation? Pivovarov!"

Pivovarov stirred slightly but did not get up.

"What's wrong with you?" asked the lieutenant.

"I can't go on," replied the soldier with disarming frankness.

"What d'you mean, can't go on?"

"I just can't. Leave me."

"Here's a how d'you do!" said Ivanovsky in amazement. "Are you joking?"

"He's playing the fool, not joking," said Lukashov with conviction. "Come on, up with you!"

The slim and not very tough Pivovarov had evidently not been expecting such a hard trip and had already reached the limit of his endurance. It was unlikely that anything more could be got out of him, but to leave him under this hayrick was also out of the question.

"Come on, get up!" ordered Ivanovsky sternly. "Sergeant Lukashov, get that man up on his feet!"

He had no option but to use his full authority and be extremely severe; nothing else would work in this case. The lieutenant, of course, knew how heartless was his far from comradely demand; he realized that this usually obedient and efficient soldier deserved

better treatment. For this mission, however, Ivanovsky had obliterated in himself any form of friendly sincerity, leaving only the cold exactingness of the commander.

Lukashov went up to Pivovarov and pulled a ski-stick out of the snow.

"You hear? Get up!"

Pivovarov stirred weakly, began trying to stand up uncertainly, scarcely able to overcome his fatigue, and Lukashov suddenly boiled over.

"Stop fooling about! Get up!"

The sergeant tried to haul the soldier to his feet with a violent pull at his collar, but Pivovarov merely fell on to his back, kicking up one ski. Lukashov tugged harder—in a grey, helpless heap, the soldier writhed in the snow dust he had kicked up.

Unable to overcome the sudden upsurge of a strange feeling contrary to his desire, the lieutenant abruptly swung his healthy leg round in a turn.

"As you were! Stop it, Lukashov!"

"Why stop? Why wet-nurse him?"

"Steady on. He's not malingering. Pivovarov, here ... a couple of swallows..."

Ivanovsky took from its strap a flask he had been carefully saving all through the journey for the next day which, by all appearances, they would have to spend in the snow without being able to move, and also for the return journey, which might well be worse. He could even be certain that it was going to be worse. At least they weren't being pursued, they simply hadn't been spotted; night and the blizzard were reliably covering up their tracks. But what would happen tomorrow? They might well look back with affection on this night which had merely worn them out. But however things might be today, if they didn't get there in time, there simply wouldn't be any tomorrow for them.

Pivovarov swallowed several times from the flask, sat for a little while, as if musing, and then rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Good! Let me have that rifle. Let me have it!"

"Lukashov will take the pack. Take his pack, Sergeant. We haven't far to go. Hardly anything. We'll take cover in a fir-copse before the dawn, we'll reconnoitre, we'll find what we're looking for and in the evening we'll put on a real firework display for the whole of the Smolensk country to marvel at. Just so long as we can get Khakimov there. How is he, still breathing?"

"He's breathing, Comrade Lieutenant," said Krasnokutsky, who was standing there in his harness of straps. "Or maybe we could leave him behind, Comrade Lieutenant. We could dig a hole for him in the hayrick..."

"No!" said Ivanovsky stiffly. "It won't do. Supposing the

Germans suddenly turn up? Won't that mean we live and he dies? What will the general say then? Remember his instructions: 'Hold on to each other out there, you'll have no one else to hold on to.' "

"That's the way it is," sighed Krasnokutsky. "Just so long as it's not all for nothing..."

"That's true," thought Ivanovsky, "it's very possibly all for nothing. That's most likely how it'll be. The man hasn't recovered consciousness for a long time. And then there's the shaking up and the cold; he'll go numb, and that'll be that. And the soldiers towing him could get knocked out sooner, and then it'll be bad for us all." Without even admitting it to himself, Ivanovsky was vaguely beginning to feel that slowly but surely, by the will of front-line fate, Khakimov was changing from a good soldier and comrade into their unwilling tormentor, if not worse.

Yet this was their comrade, doomed only by blind chance, like Sheludyak and Kudryavets. The difference between Khakimov and them was that in dying they had left gratitude and grief in the hearts of the others. The further they went, however, the more Khakimov evoked something altogether different. At the same time, it was perfectly understandable that his sole blunder was in having a constitution that could resist death more determinedly.

From his own experience, the lieutenant understood superlatively well what a disaster it was having this wounded man in the group. They were now certainly going to be late; they would not be able to cross the highway in the dark and they would be stuck in the snow out in the open with no trees for cover and where they could easily be spotted by the Germans. But however much Ivanovsky suffered from the awareness of so joyless a prospect, he could not even think of leaving the wounded man behind. His duty as a commander and a human being categorically demanded that this luckless man's fate, while he was still alive, should not be detached from their common destiny. They must do as much for him as they would for themselves. This had been the law for Volokh's scouts and it would continue to be so in Ivanovsky's group.

Like all his men, the commander had become completely exhausted during that impossibly rough night. Prevailing over his moderate but incessant pain, he could hardly move his wounded leg. None the less, by concealing his wound from the others, he remained physically on a par with them all, and this gave him the same obligations as the rest. He was beginning to feel embarrassed because, while driving others to superhuman efforts, he was travelling light himself, with only Pivovarov's rifle as an extra load. His comradely sense of duty demanded that he should share all the burdens with the rest.

They skirted the fringe of a coniferous forest and again moved over a river flood plain which Ivanovsky regarded as a relatively

safe leg of the journey. There were only meadows, bushes or marshes according to the map with no villages in the vicinity and it seemed most unlikely that they would run into any Germans. They crossed two snowed-up roads successfully, and now there remained the last—a big and, of course, always busy front-line highway which could only be crossed at night. It was, however, another five kilometres ahead, and the lieutenant, reeling with exhaustion, waited for Krasnokutsky in the dark.

"Well, how's it going?"

"I'm going to flake out soon. Could you give me a swallow?"

The lieutenant handed him the flask and the soldier took several long pulls at it.

"Better now?"

"Sort of. Shall we halt soon?"

"Soon, soon. Let me give you a hand. We'll pull together for a while."

"What use is that? It'll be too awkward that way. I'll cope somehow... The blizzard seems to be dying down."

The lieutenant looked round and, to his astonishment, saw that the storm had indeed almost abated. The black sky had lifted, had peeled away from the earth, and below lay a calm white field, strangely elevated by the rich nocturnal whiteness; on either side, a lacy mesh of bushes with the occasional smudges of young firs had appeared again. Morning was evidently approaching. Ivanovsky took the clock out of his pocket with a swollen hand. It was a quarter past six.

"Aha! Another spurt and we'll be there. We'll halt till evening."

A new worry lent him extra strength for a short while, and the lieutenant vigorously pushed his skis. They were going alongside a line of pussy-willows, black in the snow. He could not shake off a sudden mood of annoyance that the blizzard should have abated at the very time when it would have been useful, to put it mildly. It would be harder to cross the highway without it, especially if they were going to be late. By all appearances, they had just about an hour of darkness left, and that hour could decide everything. Giving them a brief send-off before they left, the general had strongly advised them to make the maximum use of darkness; only night promised them any hope of success; on spotting them by day, the Germans would naturally try to wipe them out to the last man, but at night they could still get clear and escape. This was precisely what the lieutenant understood perfectly well without any proof needed, but he was still grateful to the general for his concern and good advice, in which his attitude had been not so much general-like as paternal towards the men and to the lieutenant as well. They, too, undoubtedly understood what responsibilities were being laid on their shoulders. Since that night, they

had been lords of their own destiny because no one would be able to help them in an emergency—neither the general nor the Almighty himself. But all the way through the whirling snows of that turbulent night, the lieutenant had felt an unfading glow of gratitude to the general for his human concern. That glow was warming him, guiding him and encouraging the much-desired hope of success...

Three days previously, hanging about HQ after getting back from behind the German lines, Ivanovsky had feared most of all to catch the eye of that same captious, strict and omnipotent general, the Chief of Staff. And everybody else in the quiet forest village where HQ was stationed used to go with considerable apprehension past his tall house with the carved ornamental window surrounds. The general was ruthlessly tough on all his subordinates, and here, of course, all were directly subordinate to him except the Army Commander. God alone knew what he might make a fuss about, or when; the general could not stand loiterers, breaches of uniform and camouflage regulations, those who didn't carry out or convey orders as quickly as he would like—there was little for which a strict staff officer in the army could not find fault with a subordinate! Ivanovsky was once an involuntary witness of how the general tore a strip off a colonel for the lack of certain information on a sector of the left flank, and how the colonel, in his turn, gave a good dressing-down to the commander of a reconnaissance company of which two reconnaissance patrols had not returned from behind the enemy lines, although their time had long expired.

Ivanovsky was a chance visitor and an outsider here. During his comparatively short spell of army service, he had not had the occasion to be anywhere higher than divisional HQ, and he now observed with interest the usually quiet and fairly peaceful life of this rear institution. Once or twice, however, there had been a flap in the village—some Junkers had raided them; the bombs, however, did not do any particular damage, merely destroying an empty barn and killing a saddled horse on the street. Otherwise, everything here went peacefully and calmly, except when from time to time the Chief of Staff began inspecting the departments and then all these colonels, captains and their painstaking clerks went into a temporary state of panic and feverish activity. However, after a few punishments and shouting at one or two people, the general would soon leave and everything in HQ went on as before.

After crossing the front line, the lieutenant turned up at HQ with the two surviving scouts since, after the death of Captain Volokh, he considered it his duty to report everything that had happened in those two weeks of wandering about behind the

German lines. Preoccupied with their own affairs, however, the staff officers had not paid him much attention and this had nettled him. The pain of many losses, the death of Volokh, all their trials there, in the rear of the Germans, for him were all too fresh in his mind to become reconciled to this indifference of officers immersed in paperwork. He went to the hut of the reconnaissance group to see a fair-haired young colonel and was going to give him the gist, but the other stared for a long time at him with unseeing eyes, his mind clearly elsewhere. Then the colonel brusquely interrupted the lieutenant and ordered him to put it all in writing. He casually asked whether the lieutenant had been through the special vetting at Doltsevo, where there was an army assembly point for the remustering of men who had escaped from encirclement behind the German lines.

Ivanovsky took offence. He told the fair-haired colonel that Doltsevo wouldn't run away from him, but the German ammunition dump might, and then all their efforts and sacrifices, including the death of Volokh, that fine captain of the reconnaissance service, would be as good as wasted.

"Why wasted?" said the colonel, surprised, apparently, for the first time, and he took his pencil off the paper on which he was painstakingly drawing a complicated set of tables.

"Very simple," said Ivanovsky. "They were killed without getting any results. Wasted lives."

"So that's it!" said the colonel, and he rose to his feet, smoothing down his tunic and flaunting an enviably well-developed chest under it. "What division did you say you were from?"

Ivanovsky named his division and regiment. The colonel frowned.

"What Army is that? It's not even our front. That won't do. Write an explanation."

So he had to settle down to an explanation after all. He spent two days writing it, keeping clear of the general, who had just arrived from the front and, as was his custom after a short absence, was restoring order in HQ. Ivanovsky took shelter in the Army HQ Administration Department with a clerk, with whom he had shared a flask of *Schnaps* the evening before, and the other magnanimously shared his bed with the "nobody's lieutenant" in a half-ruined, empty house. True, in addition to the flask, he had to present the hospitable clerk with a sophisticated German compass and to part forever with the elegant monk cigarette-lighter. But in two days he drew up a lengthy account that filled two school maths exercise-books. He would doubtless have written it even quicker if he had not had to sacrifice half a day's work for a compulsory visit to HQ's Special Department. Everything went well, however.

When he brought his work, the fair-haired colonel was clearly

not in the mood for it. With a sweeping and precise movement, not even looking at it, he tossed the exercise-books on to a neighbouring desk at which a bushy-browed major was sitting over his paperwork.

"Get busy, Kovalyov, I haven't time."

But Kovalyov also hadn't time to read it on the spot for some reason, and the lieutenant was faced with no alternative but to go away and wait in his ruins. He had already snapped his hand up to his forage cap and was about to ask permission to leave, when the door to the hut was thrown wide open and on the threshold, bowing his head under the low door there appeared the very man whom he feared to meet most of all. The commanders jumped up from behind their desks, but Ivanovsky merely performed an about-turn and froze with his hand held to his forage cap.

No doubt it was his sloppy and unfamiliar appearance that seemed unusual and caught the general's keen eye. Ivanovsky was wearing the clerk's jerkin without any badges of rank and a soiled forage cap, whereas all the staff officers went about in lambskin hats.

"Who's he?" he asked, turning to the colonel, in a tone of voice that boded ill for someone.

"Lieutenant Ivanovsky, platoon commander of such-and-such a regiment of such-and-such a division," reported the lieutenant with pretended briskness and in a sinking voice.

"What division?"

Ivanovsky firmly repeated his division number.

"Never heard of it. What are you doing here?"

"He's just out of encirclement," said the colonel, standing in front of the general. He cut an impressive figure, firmly respectful, but speaking with just a trace of familiarity. Ivanovsky was standing stiffly at attention, talking for the first time in his life to anyone of such an exalted rank.

"Out of encirclement? Why are you here? Why aren't you at Doltsevo?"

This new reference to the abhorred Doltsevo rattled the lieutenant again, but this time his sense of injury made him snap out of his paralyzing awkwardness.

"I'm here about a German ammunition dump."

"That's news!" said the general, not going up to the desk and half-facing the lieutenant. His staring eyes never left Ivanovsky's rigid, upright form. "What dump? Where? How come you know about it? Have you gone into this, Colonel?"

"I'm doing so, Comrade General," said the colonel in an entirely different tone of voice from the one he had used so far. It was that of a man saying something totally at variance with what had actual-

ly happened, and it made the lieutenant display a new boldness towards him.

"The colonel doesn't want to go into it, Comrade General," snapped Ivanovsky. The general threw a keen, enquiring look at the lieutenant, then at the colonel. Feeling that something was going to be settled now once and for all, Ivanovsky added: "An artillery dump is sixty kilometres away. Several train-loads of ammunition, few sentries, a barbed-wire fence, single stakes only. It can be destroyed."

"Is that so? So you've reconnoitred it already, have you?" said the general and turned round to him in the unfastened sheepskin coat, under which there was a glimpse of military decorations. His voice was already milder, and the lieutenant noted this joyfully and promptly decided to take the bull by the horns.

"It'll be a simple matter to blow it up. Or set it on fire. And the Germans advancing on Moscow will be left without any ammunition."

He immediately regretted his impulsiveness; it had clearly cooled the newly aroused interest of the general, who now growled something vague into the fur collar of his coat and lowered himself on to a bench near the desk. The others remained standing.

"A simple matter, you say? Bang–and the German Army will be without shells? Is that it?"

"Not quite, Comrade General," said Ivanovsky, anxious to cover up his blunder. "We've already tried, but..."

"You've already tried? You have? Well?"

"We lost two men. Including Captain Volokh."

"That's just it, Lieutenant... What's your name? Ivanovsky. It can't be done off the cuff like that. You've got to put in some brainwork. But he's a good lad," said the general turning to the colonel. "In that case, send him with a group. Give him ten men. Get working on it. And no hold-ups."

"He's not been vetted, Comrade General," intervened the colonel softly. The general's eyebrows twitched.

"Rubbish! He's already been vetted. The Germans have done that. And this will be the second vetting. I'll tell Klyuzin." And, turning his head to look at the now beaming lieutenant, he said encouragingly in a slightly louder voice: "Get a group ready, Lieutenant. With him over there. Report readiness the day after tomorrow. Clear?"

"It is!" Ivanovsky didn't so much speak the words as shout them with boyish glee and, saluting smartly, he went out and closed the door behind him.

He was not so lucky the following day. The colonel, on whom he called again in the morning, sent him to a Major Kolomiyets. Ivanovsky spent half a day waiting for this officer, and when final-

ly he arrived and the lieutenant passed on the colonel's instructions, the other pulled the rug out from under his feet with his very first sentence.

"Where am I supposed to find the men? I haven't got any except one driver."

With a feeling that everything was going down the drain, Ivanovsky did not bother with further explanations or proof, but, filled with fresh determination, walked quickly to the tall house with the decorative shutters. He was not, of course, admitted, and he got embroiled in a foolish and futile argument with the imperturbable sentry at the porch and was in absolute despair when the door flew open suddenly and the general appeared in person on the threshold. He did not recognize the yesterday's lieutenant straightaway, and Ivanovsky had to give his name again and announce in faltering voice that the organization of the group wasn't working out. The general's eyes blazed wrathfully, as if Ivanovsky himself were to blame for the failure.

"How d'you mean, it isn't working out?"

"There aren't any men, Comrade General. The colonel sent..."

"Send Zimenkov to me!" he flung at someone who was standing behind him and who disappeared with alacrity down the passage. Without saying another word, the general followed him. Ivanovsky was left standing on the porch with the sentry, who kept glancing at him with silent malice. "You still won't get through!" was written on his face. But the lieutenant was no longer eager to go inside that big house. He humbly waited about twenty minutes, and then a senior lieutenant appeared on the porch in a new army sheepskin coat with a Mauser slung across his shoulder.

"Go to Captain Zimenkov and get the men. The general will be expecting a report that the group is ready tomorrow at thirteen hundred hours."

"Right!" said Ivanovsky. He did not even ask who this Captain Zimenkov was and where to find him; he would have to learn that from the horse-holders in the street. And, indeed, by evening, he had a list of eight men and a sergeant-major; he put himself down as Number Ten.

The lieutenant began making his preparations.

In addition to the men, he had to obtain ammunition, bottles of kerosene, explosives and two metres of fuse. Four of the nine men had worn greatcoats and no warm jerkins, they had to be fitted out properly. Someone refused for a long time to issue camouflage suits (the voucher had not been signed by a senior officer), and a journey had to be made to a village fifteen kilometres in the rear for skis. The night before leaving, he only just managed to snatch a couple of hours' sleep; he only ate once that day and attended three briefings, but at thirteen thirty hours ne-

vertheless marched the group to the tall house with the decorative shutters. This time he was admitted without obstruction, and, trembling with joy, he reported his readiness to carry out the mission.

The general wound up a telephone conversation and replaced the receiver. Just as he was, with a fur jerkin over his tunic, he silently went out into the yard where the nine men with Dyubin in charge, had been given the command "Attention!" The general silently walked along the line and inspected each man. For the first time since he had been at HQ, Ivanovsky could not even see a trace of the intimidating staff officer's harshness on his no longer young and already lined face with the sunken cheeks. It was now simply the tired face of an elderly man burdened with many worries and suffering from lack of sleep who was their commander by force of chance.

"Well, my sons!" said the general, and something tugged strangely at the lieutenant's heart-strings. "D'you know where you're going? D'you know it's going to be tough? But it's vitally necessary. See, it's snowing." He pointed to the low, overcast sky from which light snowflakes were falling. "Aircraft are grounded. You are our last hope..."

He went on to say more, telling the men how to act in an emergency in the rear where no one but your comrade can help you. But he might not even do that–the lieutenant had accumulated enough experience of operations behind the German lines during these two weeks of wandering through the forests in the Smolensk country. And now, from his very first words, the general's totally unofficer-like, almost friendly tone of voice and his personal interest in their highly uncertain future impressed the lieutenant, who from that moment on, was ready to do anything to justify the Chief of Staff's faith in them. Even death did not seem frightening to him at that moment, he was ready to risk his life for his homeland if need be and if the general should give his blessing for it.

No doubt the others were feeling the same way in that short line of men, full of attention and determination. When Ivanovsky had saluted the general and turned the group towards the way out, he seemed to hear fanfares in his soul like an irrepressible triumphal march. He knew that he would do everything he had been sent to do; it must not, and therefore could not, be otherwise.

Chapter Six

However much the lieutenant had rushed the men over the last kilometres of the march, dawn nevertheless caught them in an open field white with snow after the night's blizzard and on the approaches to the highway.

Availing himself of the twilight before dawn, Ivanovsky covered another kilometre. With the risk steadily rising, he was nearing the ribbon of the road, only just visible on the hillside, when he suddenly saw lorries coming down it from the top of the hill. The lieutenant nearly cried out with chagrin; fifteen minutes earlier they could have crossed over to the other side. He consoled himself at first by thinking that the lorries would soon pass, and they did indeed quickly disappear into the distance; but after them came a horse-drawn wagon-train, and then two black, squat light vehicles shot out from behind the hill. He realized that the day was beginning and the traffic was on the increase. They could not even think of crossing the road unnoticed with their improvised sledge.

Neither drawing nearer to the road nor distancing himself from it, Ivanovsky turned sharply to one side towards a nearby bare hill crowned by sparse bushes. There was hardly any safe cover there, but to wait in the hollow in full view of the highway was also out of the question; it had become light and the Germans could spot them at any moment.

Using up the last of their strength, the skiers climbed up the hillside, all but tipping the wounded man out of the sledge, and the lieutenant, overcoming the pain, to which he was now accustomed, wearily glided over to the bushes, already quite near. When he was half-way there, however, a high rampart rose up out of the snow in front of him; it neatly bisected the hill and ran down towards the highway. The lieutenant stopped in dismay, but soon realized what it was all about and jubilantly waved to his comrades slowly coming up behind him: "Get a move on!"

It was an anti-tank ditch half-choked with snow, one of those many-kilometres-long defence works which, since the outbreak of the war, had gashed the land of Russia in all directions. Much labour had been expended on digging them, but the lieutenant could not recall a single instance of such a ditch holding up the advance of Hitler's panzer divisions. These colossal defence works only fulfilled their function when reliably covered by infantry and artillery fire; otherwise their tank-stopping capacity was hardly more than that of an ordinary roadside ditch.

But the ditch now seemed very appropriate on that open hill, and without more ado the lieutenant skied diagonally down on to the wide bottom, which was covered by driven snow. It was quiet and fairly deep down there, the wind on one side had piled up an

elegantly shaped overhang which gave some kind of cover from above. They could probably stay there for some time.

One after another, the men slithered down into this shelter and promptly collapsed on to the soft curves of the snowdrifts. Ivanovsky also collapsed, as if driving his behind into the dense, blizzard-packed snow and, breathing heavily, looked for a long time with unseeing eyes at the powdery snow being whipped by the wind off the crest of the overhang in front of him. He did not know what was to be done next, or where and how to get across that ill-fated highway; and he could not imagine what to do about the wounded man. He only felt that since the previous night everything had turned out worse and they could even come to a very sticky end. But he could not accept that it would all end in failure after so much effort; he felt that he must resist the circumstances as much as was humanly possible, just as he would resist the Germans. So long as his strength did not fail, he had plenty of determination.

They lay for about twenty minutes in the snow without uttering a word, and he could not summon up the strength to speak and appoint a look-out. He merely kept repeating to himself that someone must be picked out right now. Although they were all completely done in, someone had to sacrifice his rest and climb up into the wind and cold so that the others wouldn't be caught napping by the enemy.

"We must have a look-out," said Ivanovsky sleepily at last and he waited, but the skiers seemed deaf. "You, Sudnik."

Sudnik, leaning back against the wall of snow, was holding on his knees the pack with its delicate load cushioned in wood shavings. He seemed to be asleep. His head in the wet hood was thrown back and his eyes were closed.

"Sudnik!" called the lieutenant a little louder.

"Right away, right away..."

After a moment's delay, the soldier abruptly sat straight up. Then, resting his weight on his hands, he climbed to his feet and, staggering suddenly, nearly fell down again.

"Steady! The bottles," said the lieutenant in a fright that pulled him out of his extreme and stupefying fatigue.

Leaving his skis down below, Sudnik clambered up to the steep breastwork just slightly to one side of the men and lay down behind it, a white blob on the fresh snow.

"What's happening over there? Are they still moving?" asked Ivanovsky.

"Yes. And there's no end to them."

Of course, they would keep on coming; they wouldn't wait until he was safely on the other side so that he could wipe out their ammunition dump. They had their own objectives and their own

tasks, directly contrary to his own, and he thought it was a good thing there weren't any depots or rear units in the vicinity, otherwise he wouldn't be able to spend long under cover there.

Something like half an hour must have passed, and Ivanovsky was chilled to the marrow; his body, warmed by skiing, was beginning to be penetrated by the cold. All but Sudnik on the breastwork were lying motionless with exhaustion. Thinking that they could get frost-bitten this way, he shouted:

"No sleeping! Come on, sit up, all of you!"

Someone stirred. Lukashov sat up and surveyed their snowy shelter with eyes clouded by fatigue. Pivovarov did not move from his cosy place in the snow; he was asleep. After a moment's thought, the lieutenant decided that he would nevertheless have to let them doze for a few minutes, otherwise it would be impossible to get them up again. They would hardly get frost-bite in thirty of forty minutes. True, he himself in such a case no longer had any right to fall asleep.

With a considerable effort, reinforced by the awareness of danger close at hand, Ivanovsky threw off his stupefying drowsiness and stood up. He had long been worrying about Khakimov, but only now had the opportunity arisen to examine him. Swaying slightly, the lieutenant went over to the wounded man. As the commander had feared, he was in a bad way. Evidently still unconscious, he was lying inert on the skis, tightly wrapped in a snow-powdered groundsheet, through a narrow opening in which could be seen his pale, blue-tinged face. The edges of the groundsheet were thick with the rime deposited by his fast, laboured breathing, and the snowflakes falling from them immediately melted on Khakimov's damp cheeks—he was in a fever. The lieutenant stooped over the soldier and quietly called his name, but there was no reaction, just the same tense, rapid breathing.

After sitting with the wounded man for a while, Ivanovsky began to doubt the rightness of his decision that had condemned Khakimov to such a perilous journey. Perhaps it really would have been better to leave him in a hayrick somewhere until the group returned. But that would have meant leaving someone else with the wounded man and the lieutenant could not agree to this. Besides, only five were now left of the ten, and their main mission, for the sake of which, although belatedly, they had come here, was becoming more and more complicated. To carry out this task they had first to get across the road, but the lieutenant could not even imagine how this was to be done in view of the Germans now choking the road.

The thought of this highway gave him no peace of mind and he stood up quickly soon afterwards. He could not help Khakimov in any way, and the mission was constantly on his mind. He stuck his skis into a snowdrift and, stepping unsteadily through the snow,

climbed up to Sudnik on the breastwork. It was windy and colder than down below, but there was a broad view of the field and both ends of the road, the middle of which was screened by the hilltop. It was in that direction that the ditch ran. On the far side of the road, in some places coming quite close to it, were scattered shrubs and copses. In the distance, and somewhat to one side of the river flood plain, stood the familiar dark pine-forest that had once given them such a hostile reception.

The lieutenant took the map out and got his bearings. The dump had intentionally not been marked, but even so he distinctly remembered its location on the northern projection of a tiny copse by the river. On identifying that hill on the map, the lieutenant saw that they were not more than about two kilometres away from it. He felt furious again; it was so near and yet so far. Because of that blasted road, they had to lose a whole day in the unknown and endure the freezing cold.

Ivanovsky joined Sudnik in watching the road, on which, at short intervals of time, small gaps occurred in the traffic. This consisted mainly of lorries, covered and open, of all makes—evidently collected from all the countries of Europe. Most of them were racing eastwards, to Moscow. And suddenly the lieutenant thought that it would be worth the risk of crossing the road if this were done not by all of them with the wounded man, but by one, or by two at the most. During that day, he would spy out a great deal, reconnoitre, draw up a plan of action, and, come nightfall, would take the whole group across the road.

This thought cheered him up at once; the new objective had inspired him to action. He crawled down from the breastwork and quietly but vigorously ordered the skiers:

"On your feet! Jump up and down! Warm yourselves up, all of you! Come on now!"

Krasnokutsky and Lukashov got up at once, slapping themselves with their mittened hands and flapping their arms about. Lukashov shook Pivovarov, who was stupefied by sleep.

"Get warmed up! Put more life into it!" insisted the lieutenant, and at that point he remembered the best order for making people get up. "Breakfast time! Lukashov, get out the preserves! Two rusks to each man."

Shivering drowsily, Lukashov took several rye-rusks and a tin of fish out of the bag. The lieutenant's knife stabbed its tin bottom with a squeak and they began scooping out the frozen contents with knives and spoons.

"Well, Pivovarov laddie, had a nice snooze?" asked the lieutenant, trying to fight the cold with forced gaiety.

"Oh, just a bit of a nap."

"So you nearly gave up, then?"

"I was tired, Comrade Lieutenant," answered the soldier simply.

"I thought you were a tough egg," joked Ivanovsky, "and now just look at you..."

"Knocked out, I was."

He wasn't justifying himself or whining. After his short rest, he looked embarrassed and guilty, and his swarthy cheeks were burning with an almost childlike flush after his sleep.

"Knocked out!" teased Lukashov accusingly. "You're not with your nanny now! A laggard's worse than a dead man."

"What's a dead man? A dead man doesn't need any strength. But look at the blisters on my hands from the rope!" and Krasnokutsky showed his swollen red palms. Needless to say, he had been having a rough time of it during the night. But who hadn't? And they didn't know yet what even rougher times awaited them in the near future.

"Those two are the bright ones," continued Lukashov with his former irritability. "Either they quit or they lost their way."

He meant Dyubin and Zayats, whom the lieutenant had not forgotten for a moment. With a dead man, you knew exactly where you were; with Khakimov, it was very difficult, but more understandable; but the sergeant-major and Zayats had disappeared during the night journey as if the earth had swallowed them up, silently, bafflingly, and without a trace.

"If they really lost their way and didn't just clear off—fair enough. But we don't really know..." said Lukashov, looking anxiously and grimly along the ditch, and the lieutenant understood what the sergeant was hinting at. But it was out of the question. Ivanovsky did not want to allow even a suggestion that Sergeant-Major Dyubin could have been guilty of treachery. Nonetheless, he was full of uncertainty and doubt himself; however hard he thought about it, he couldn't understand where those two had vanished to from his group, small as it already had been.

"They'll bring the Germans on our trail yet," responded Krasnokutsky bluntly. "All it needs is a ski-trail in the snow; if they follow it up, they'll find us."

"Anything's possible," agreed Lukashov darkly.

"No, you mustn't say such things," intervened Ivanovsky. "The sergeant-major isn't like that. He's not that kind of a man."

Lukashov looked wearily towards the far end of the ditch.

"He may not be that kind of a man, but anything can happen. We had such a gallant captain in the hundred and ninth, he was forever building defences. And he built them facing the wrong way, as it turned out. The Germans showed up and he was the first to surrender."

"Now you stop that," interrupted Ivanovsky firmly. "Dyubin's not that captain, that's a fact. And you must trust people more, Lukashov. After all, they trust you."

"Me, of course..."

"Why d'you think Dyubin's a worse man than you are?"

"Because I'm here and he ain't."

The logic of his arguments was truly devastating and it was hard to raise any objection. Lukashov, indeed, had not fallen behind, although he had been bringing up the rear, and moreover, had not allowed any falling back by Pivovarov, who was now sitting beside him. Lukashov was right on the whole; but Ivanovsky didn't want prematurely to pronounce sentence on Dyubin. There was something sympathetic about the sergeant-major, in spite of the bloody-mindness that had rattled the lieutenant so much.

Sitting in the snowdrift, they soon ate up the tinned fish and finished their rusks. Ivanovsky put the spoon in his pocket.

"Sergeant Lukashov," he said in a changed tone of voice, "take over from me in my absence. I've got to do a bit of reconnaissance. All of you are to stay here. You can have a rest. Keep a look-out in all directions. I'll be back soon. Anything not clear?"

"Everything's clear."

"It'll all be done, Lieutenant."

"Right. Follow me, Pivovarov laddie!"

"Me?" Pivovarov was astonished, but after a pause, he began getting obediently to his feet.

"Take your skis and other gear. Let's get going. Lukashov, take over from Sudnik. He must be frozen stiff up there."

Sinking into the deep snow, waist-high in places, Ivanovsky headed along the ditch towards the highway. They were carrying their skis in their hands. From time to time, there were slight bends in the ditch and the lieutenant looked round warily on emerging from them. But there did not seem to be anyone in the ditch or in the vicinity. The snowdrifts on the bottom were untouched. Finally, they heard the muffled chugging of diesel engines and there was the reek, barely detectable in the cold air, of synthetic petrol fumes–so this must be the highway. Ivanovsky stuck his head out from a broad, clayey projection at a bend in the ditch and immediately sprang back again. Very close at the end of a wide gap in the ditch, a lorry shot past covered with billowing tarpaulin, then another and then yet another. It was a whole convoy, and Germans in green greatcoats could be seen in several open vehicles near the driver's cabs. By all appearances, they had been frozen to the marrow by the Russian cold and they were not looking to their sides. The lieutenant signalled with his hand to Pivovarov, who was rigid with tension, and climbed up to the slope along the edge of a snowdrift.

Of course, he was far from hoping for quick success, for a moment suitable to make the crossing, but he was not expecting persistent bad luck either... Numbed by the freezing wind, he waited

until all the lorries had rumbled past and there seemed to be no one else about. But hardly had he pushed his head out from behind the clods of frozen earth on the parapet than he saw more Germans not far away. There were three of them, signalmen. While one climbed a telegraph-pole and busied himself up there with his lines, the two others stayed with their apparatus on the road-side. They were clearly laying on communications. Rifle-barrels projected from behind their backs, and coils of wire and tools lay on the ground. Absorbed in their work, the Germans were not being very vigilant; but, of course, they would have noticed the two Russians if Ivanovsky and Pivovarov had taken it into their heads to dash across the road under their noses.

Which meant they had to wait again.

The lieutenant lay miserably on the frozen, snow-sprinkled clods of earth, never taking his eyes off the road. It had become bitterly cold, his legs were freezing, his wounded thigh was getting worse and the pain was giving him more trouble. Several times, the traffic on the road had been renewed reaching maximum density, then had abated somewhat, and then there had been a gap of a kilometre or more. Once or twice, a more or less convenient moment had turned up for crossing to the other side, but the Germans were still busy with their communications. Three times the lieutenant took out the weighty cube of the tank-clock; the last time he did so, it said half past ten. The signalmen were still there. Half an hour passed before the one perched on the post finally climbed down to earth again. The lieutenant thought that now, perhaps, they would clear off. But the German went to the next telegraph-post, fastened the irons to his feet and climbed up to the cables again. They were talking among themselves quietly over there, but the wind carried their words away and the lieutenant could not distinguish anything.

This went on for an interminably long time. Ivanovsky had already begun looking round in the endeavour to find a more suitable spot well away from these signalmen, when he saw that another German had turned up as well. There was no knowing how he had got there; he must have been hidden by the hill as he sat somewhere on the road. The lieutenant shuddered slightly; if he had risked running across the highway, he would certainly have run into the invisible fourth German. Meanwhile the signalman, crouched down over his apparatus, chatted with the others and waved to the one sitting on the pole, who began climbing down. While he was descending, the other three stood up, casually sorted out their packs and boxes and set off along the road.

This time they stopped at a considerable distance from the ditch. None of them climbed up a pole this time, and the lieutenant glanced towards the opposite end of the road; he must clearly

make up his mind now. But first he must get as close to the road as possible.

He crawled down the slope to the bottom of the ditch, seriously disturbing his wounded thigh. Pivovarov jumped down from his nest in the snow, Ivanovsky silently nodded, and the two of them, keeping close to the steep side of the slope, quickly walked downwards along the ditch. They could easily have been seen from the road, and the lieutenant quickly dropped down behind a diagonal snowdrift and burrowed into the snow, while Pivovarov nimbly did likewise beside him. His boyish face, puffy with cold and lack of sleep, was tensely alert, and from time to time the lieutenant intercepted an alarmed and enquiring glance. Since he was on the bottom of the ditch, he could see absolutely nothing at all and was totally dependent on his commander, who was now making the decisions that meant so much to them both.

The lieutenant himself, however, could see nothing from there, and he was forced to trust to his ears, sensitively detecting all the varied and changing sounds that reached him from the road. Of course, this was not the most reliable means of all those possible for crossing, but there was no alternative. Waiting until the chugging roar of diesels on the highway had abated somewhat and unable to detect any new sounds close at hand, Ivanovsky said to himself: "Now! Let's go!" And he jumped up.

A few bounds through the deep snow took him as far as the point where the ditch ended on the road. He looked out—the highway was indeed empty in the near vicinity, although he simply didn't have time to glance at the distant hill. With a wild bound, bent double, he gained the smooth crown of the road and executed a flying leap down to the bottom of the next sector of the ditch. As he ran, he noted with satisfaction Pivovarov's heavy breathing behind him. With all his strength, he raced along the ditch to the first bend, which was not far away. After a few bounds, however, he heard the strained whining of engines again and winced inwardly, expecting shouts or perhaps shots. But he had time to take cover behind the bend. Pivovarov was slightly late, but the lieutenant looked round and saw that the lorries appeared a second after the soldier went down behind the turn. The lorries hurtled past without reducing speed and, for the first time that morning, Ivanovsky inhaled with relief the bitter, lung-searing air:

"Whew!"

Both breathed exhaustedly and heavily for a few moments, and then Ivanovsky rose to his knees and looked round. There were some bushes not far away, the scraggy tops sticking up here and there from behind the high breastwork, and the lieutenant and the soldier set off wearily along the ditch. Once they were well away

from the road, they tried to get out into the open. To the commander's surprise, Pivovarov was more successful; with his first attempt, the lieutenant only managed to get half-way up the steep slope and then slithered down into a snowdrift. His thigh was hurting very badly again. This time he was unable, or did not want, to suppress a groan, and the frightened Pivovarov up on the breastwork looked round enquiringly at his commander.

"It's all right. Everything's okay."

Ivanovsky got a grip on himself and prevailed over the pain; the soldier stretched out a ski-stick to his commander with the aid of which he finally scrambled over the breastwork.

"That's it. Now let's get our skis on!"

Here, no doubt, they could go parallel to the ditch. They were shielded from the road by the breastwork, and in some places the bushes gave them fair cover.

To their right, in the distance, were the grey tree-tops of the pine grove where success or failure awaited their efforts and where glory might be their destiny or, perhaps, death.

Chapter Seven

As he skied his way through the scrub, Ivanovsky fell victim to an unpleasant, steadily increasing and almost insurmountable disquiet.

He could not understand at all why it should make itself felt so insistently at this particular moment; after all, everything was shaping out more or less favourably: they had crossed the highway, they had apparently not been noticed, and they were very near to the destination of this difficult many-kilometre-long march through the night. Although there were obstacles, the climax was approaching and they could now take action. True, their forces had been scattered; some had been lost while crossing the front line, two had disappeared in the night, three had been left behind on the other side of the road, and there were only two of them here. Two, of course, were not ten. But this circumstance could hardly be the reason for his vague and persistent uneasiness.

The nearer they came to the grove, now visible in the distance, the more alarmed the lieutenant became. He was overcome by such a violent fit of impatience that he would not even stop to adjust the bandage on his hip; the wound was apparently beginning to bleed. However, he had been trying not to notice the pain for a long time now, and he had become inured to it during the night. He was not even looking too attentively to either side of him any more, but was making for the grove with all his might, as if the greatest reward of his life lay in store for him there, or perhaps

the greatest disaster. Pivovarov, streaming with sweat which he had already stopped bothering to wipe from his face with the sleeve of his camouflage blouse, tried not to lag behind, and the two of them, panting for breath, rapidly climbed up along the fringe of the scrub. It was already fairly light, a moderate, freezing wind was blowing, and the sky, completely veiled in cloud, hung low over the grey, dreary, hazy open ground.

On reaching the top of the hill, Ivanovsky looked down through the bare boughs of the alder-bushes. Before them lay a valley with a strip of scrub protruding into it. The lieutenant barely recognized the alder-grove in which they had waited for nightfall with Volokh, but instead of the thicket that had given cover to seven men, there were only the frozen boughs of sickly little bushes forlornly black against the snow; a bird could hardly take cover in them, let alone a man. However, on the hill across the valley, just as before, stood the green grove surrounded by the widely-spaced posts of the German fence at which they had met with such bad luck last time, but should be more fortunate now. It could not possibly be otherwise.

At the sight of the familiar fence, the lieutenant had a sense of relief; he had made it, and that was all that mattered. The rest depended on his skill and resourcefulness, and on the courage of the men themselves. The action of the converging causes here was reduced to the most possible minimum in such cases.

Ivanovsky stood hidden in the scrub for a minute or two and relaxed, quelling the impatience that haunted him all the time. He tried to convince himself that everything was going to be all right. True, he did not succeed in finally believing this; something was persistently oppressing and alarming him as if he had not already been alarmed enough during that night. Pivovarov did not ask any questions, evidently understanding the position without need of explanation and waiting for them to go further. Ivanovsky, however, could not take his eyes off that distant fringe of evergreens, as if he hoped to see something. But over there, about a kilometre away, if not more, there was nothing conspicuous except the trunks of some widely spaced pines and the few posts of the fence. Incidentally, it was understandable; the Germans had had time to camouflage the dump. They knew how to camouflage themselves; there were various nets and planted greenery; there was the snow. The only surprising thing was what had happened to the road on which Volokh's scouts had spotted the German lorries carrying the ammunition. It had run right up the hillside to the grove, and now there was not a trace of it on the snow there. Had it, perhaps, been snowed under in the night? Although some vestige of it ought to have been preserved, even after a blizzard, there was not a sign of it anywhere. Or had they, perhaps, built a road somewhere else,

not visible from where they were standing? As it happened, he had no need of the road now; they would not have occasion to use it. It was much more important to find a covered approach to that grove so that at night, in the darkness, they could crawl up as close as possible to the fence without being spotted. By all appearances, the open field side was of little use for this; they must reconnoitre the approaches from the south.

"Pivovarov, let's go! Only quietly..."

Avoiding the frozen branches that clutched at their hoods, they set off downwards through the bushes, skirting the field. Ivanovsky was very much on the alert, he was tensed up as never before throughout the whole of that over-eventful night. But there was silence all round, and this reassured him a little. How many times now had the lieutenant begun to work out the best way of getting through the fence—this now perhaps the most important and difficult part of his task. Of course, if the stacks were close to the wire, it would be possible to throw grenades and bottles of kerosene at them, although they were unlikely to be as little as a grenadethrow away. In that case, they would have to cope with the fence. It would be better for him to do this alone, with the others covering him, should he be spotted, and ensuring that they all got away. Even if they got into a brief fight with the German sentries, they would have the element of surprise on their side, and about one minute was enough to do all that was necessary. It would be worse, however, should there be dogs.

Even if there were, one or two of the men would have to crawl under the wire, while the others would distract the dogs and draw the fire of the sentries. There was no other choice. The main thing was to set fire to and blow up as many stacks as possible in a matter of seconds. The rest would be done by detonating explosions, and fire would finish the job.

Going through sparse woods, they crossed the vale and skirted the open part of the field by skiing along the fringe. There was no one in the vicinity; no one turned up in their path. They proceeded cautiously, no longer in a hurry. From time to time, the lieutenant halted and listened: there was only the windy winter silence all round them. Once, the breeze carried the distant roar of engines into the vale but, on listening, Ivanovsky realized that this was from the highway. The grove in the distance was amazingly quiet, silent, almost dead.

Half an hour later, they came upon a small gully across their route. Bare, sinuous, its slopes covered with driven snow, it could be viewed all the way along. The lieutenant did not immediately realize that this was the gully from which Volokh had set out into the snowfall for the fence. This meant they must go still further, skirting the dump a kilometre deep through the bushes. There they

would surely be able to go nearer and study it in greater detail.

He looked back at Pivovarov, whose ruddy face was half-hidden by the wet, lowered hood. The lad was plying his sticks with all his might; his skis, as before, were sinking deep into the powdery snow. Fighting down a growing tension as he neared his objective, Ivanovsky silently signalled to Pivovarov to wait and himself skirted the gully, halting behind a wide-spreading hazel-bush.

The fence-posts, stripped of their bark, were already quite near. A man's height or more, they were conspicuous against the snowy green young pines. But, amazingly, nothing was visible behind them. However much he strained his eyes, he simply could not see the familiar stacks of grey and green boxes which had stood so clearly in front of him when he had first studied them through the binoculars. Nor were there any tarpaulins to be seen. This circumstance again troubled the lieutenant with an uneasy presentiment and with a wave of the hand he ordered Pivovarov to get down and keep dead still. The other understood the signal and crouched down on his skis, while the lieutenant, after a moment's hesitation, skied out of the bushes.

He had, no doubt, behaved foolishly; the commander of a group should not risk his life like that, but Ivanovsky was no longer in a state to restrain himself. His forebodings had got the better of him, and, swallowing the gorge that rose in his throat and without taking his eyes off the fringe of the grove, he quickly went straight towards it.

The posts were now some three hundred metres away, and at the very beginning of this trip the lieutenant had realized that there was no wire on them. The wire that had once surrounded the dump had been removed, and its absence gave Ivanovsky cause for alarm, almost panic. No longer taking care and heedless of the fact that he could easily be spotted in the open field, he reached the fringe of the grove in a few bounds and stopped, shaken and almost devastated by what he found.

There was no ammunition dump there.

In the pine-grove on the hill, there were neither sentries, nor dogs, nor stacks of yellow and green boxes: virgin snow lay underfoot and a row of white posts ran round the edge of the grove, the only reminders of the dump; no other traces were left. The wire had evidently been removed from the posts and taken to some other, no doubt more necessary place.

The bewilderment in the lieutenant's mind gave way to consternation, almost distraction. He stood for a while on the snow, clean and fresh after the night's blizzard. Then he skied over to the opposite side where the entrance for the lorries had been. But there was nothing left; only in the grove of young pines under the snow it was possible to imagine several empty pits and on the edge

of the grove, by the pillars, there was a heap of snow-powdered poles; probably the stringers on which the stacks had rested. There was nothing else to be seen. The road, the absence of which had surprised the lieutenant back in the field, was an empty white strip under the snow—it had not been used for a long time. No traces were visible anywhere.

Suddenly drained of all his strength, Ivanovsky leaned his shoulder against the rough trunk of a pine, crushed by the emptiness and desolation of this grove that was of no use to anybody any more. The dump had been moved. That was obvious, yet he could not believe it. In his bewilderment, he could not shake off the stubborn, protesting thought that this was all a mistake, a silly misunderstanding, and that only a little effort was needed to comprehend it. He could not conceive of anything else, because he was in no state to reconcile himself to the fact that this time too he had been overtaken by failure, that the tremendous exertions of the group had been wasted, that they had subjected themselves to a meaningless and deadly risk all for nothing, had lost men and had completely used up their strength. They were too late. He did not believe it at first, but, after standing for a while under the pine-tree while he regained his breath, he grasped that this was no trick of the imagination. It was harsh, evil reality, just one more disaster on top of all those that had fallen to his unhappy lot during this war.

Pulling his shoulder away from the tree with an effort, he stood up straight on his skis and weakly pushed off with his sticks. The skis slithered through the snow and stopped. He did not know where to go next; for the first time there was no hurry. He leaned on his sticks. A sprightly magpie appeared on a pine-branch nearby and chattered angrily at him; a tom-tit fluttered over his head and dived into the grove with a chirp. Ivanovsky was blind to everything. A kind of numbness had paralyzed his relaxed muscles; he was not thinking of anything at all, simply staring into the emptiness of the grove, aware of an enervating, overwhelming fatigue which there seemed to be no possibility of overcoming.

Some time passed in this way, but the grove before was empty and unneeded, and the lieutenant was finally forced to pull himself together: his men were waiting for him, after all. Above all, Pivovarov. Ivanovsky looked back; the soldier was patiently waiting where he had been left on the other side of the gully, and the lieutenant waved him over.

While Pivovarov was following Ivanovsky's trail to the grove, the commander undid his ski-fasteners and stepped into the snow. There was clearly nothing to be afraid of here; nobody was about in the empty grove. He sat down on a low, snow-sprinkled tree-stump and stretched out his leg. He must decide what to do next. Above all, he must work out how to explain this failure to the

men. He could not shake off a feeling of personal guilt, as if he himself had invented the whole story of the dump and had perpetrated a hoax. Although, if you went into it, he himself had been cheated worse of all. Or, to be more precise, the Germans had fooled everybody.

As it happened, there was no deceit here; there was a war on, and that meant all its contrivances were in action, all possibilities were being used, including time, which in this case had worked in favour of the German side and had ruthlessly left Ivanovsky and his men as the losers.

Pivovarov came slowly up along Ivanovsky's trail and silently stopped opposite him. The soldier incomprehendingly surveyed the grove, with an occasional enquiring glance at the lieutenant. Finally, he hazarded a guess.

"Was it here, then?"

"Exactly—was."

"The slobs! Have they moved it away, or something?"

"Of course they have!" Ivanovsky jumped up off his stump. "They've fooled us!"

To the lieutenant's surprise, Pivovarov reacted with great restraint to his heated, embittered words.

"We were obviously too late."

"Of course! Two weeks have passed. That's long enough!"

"So what now? Will we have to look for it?"

"Look for what?"

"Why, the dump. It's an order, after all."

True, there was no dump, but the order to destroy it was still in force. It wasn't so long ago that the lieutenant had personally been trying to get that order in HQ, and it had finally landed on his own luckless head. "Come on, now, carry out that order, Lieutenant Ivanovsky, find the dump," he thought bitterly. However, the lieutenant liked the tone of voice in which Pivovarov had mentioned the order and he was inwardly delighted. It should not take a lot of explaining to the men: if Pivovarov had realized that, the others doubtless would do so too.

The sense of disaster that at first had seemed about to overwhelm the lieutenant, began to recede gradually, although, of course, he understood that it would not be easy to cope. By all appearances, the dump had been moved east, nearer to the front line, towards Moscow, and that was where they must look for it. If they went along the highway combing each grove, they might possibly succeed in stumbling on it. Then he remembered the men on the other side of the road with the wounded Khakimov and realized that they would not be able to look for it. It would probably require a great deal of time, colossal efforts and far more food reserves than they had. In any case, how far would they get with

Khakimov? A fat lot of good it would do to search in dense forest for a camouflaged, carefully guarded dump; it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. There might not even be a dump any more; the ammunition could have been issued to the units and expended in battle down to the last mortar bomb.

So what next? Return with the unexpended explosives, without having used a single grenade? Hump those bottles of kerosene again and tremble with fear in case some Jerry fired off a burst for the hell of it and happened to hit them? And half the group lost at that. With a gravely wounded man in a sledge. And in sum, to appear before the general who had sent him out as a disgusting and total failure. What would the lieutenant say to him?

It was a nasty predicament indeed...

Ivanovsky scooped up a handful of snow, ate some and spat it out. As always after a sleepless night, there was a lingering, disgusting taste of metal on his tongue. He was feeling slightly sick. He even felt as if he had caught a chill. This could be from fatigue and loss of blood, however.

"Have you got a dressing?" the lieutenant asked Pivovarov; the other took off his mitten and began feeling in his trouser pockets while the lieutenant got up from the tree-stump.

"Help me," he said, unfastening his trousers. There was no sense in hiding his silly wound any more.

"Hit, are you? "

"Bullet nicked me in the night. Here it is, blast it; keeps on bleeding."

Not surprisingly, Pivovarov was frightened. The lieutenant's white underpants and his quilted trousers were stiff with congealed blood. On the outside of the hip, from the slight graze, a dark-brown trickle of blood was running down to his knee.

"Come on, bind it. And more tightly."

"You need a doctor."

"What doctor? You be the doctor."

Pivovarov was clearly more alarmed by his commander's wound than by the disappearance of the ammunition dump. Crouching beside him, the soldier somewhat ineptly wound the bandage round Ivanovsky's leg and firmly tied the ends in a reef-knot.

"So that it won't slip down."

"All right. It'll hold for the time being."

Ivanovsky threw the old, blood-soaked bandage down on the snow, hitched up his breeches and tied up the cord of his stained camouflage trousers. Pivovarov was fastening on his skis. Judging by his unruffled appearance, the failure over the dump had not affected his morale in the least and the lieutenant secretly envied the man's fortitude. However, what did it matter to a soldier? The demands on him were not so great.

"What am I to tell the boys now?" asked the commander anxiously, feeling the desire to consult someone in order somehow to unburden himself of his dejection.

"Tell them what's happened," replied Pivovarov simply.

"That the Germans fooled us?"

"All right, then. If they fooled us, that means they fooled us."

"Yes, you're right," said the lieutenant after a moment's thought. "They must be told the truth. Only where next?"

"Have a look at the map," advised the other.

Divine simplicity. Pivovarov clearly assumed that everything was marked on a military map. Exactly the same was also thought by village women watching as the commander unfolded the map and marvelling when he asked them the name of their village or how many kilometres it was to the city. Pivovarov must have been thinking along such lines.

The lieutenant was nervous, however, and was beginning to lose his temper; the disturbed wound was aching and he was in a ghastly state of mind. He still did not have a clear idea of what to do. He looked with loathing down at the sloping white field and the distant scrub until the thought of the men left on the other side of the road caught up with him and spurred him to action.

He then pushed off with his sticks and quickly started back down the former ski-trail.

Chapter Eight

While they were following the familiar route through the bushes, Ivanovsky, not so much calming down as becoming accustomed to his failure, tried to sort himself out and decide what to do next. Of course, the disappearance of the ammunition dump had made his whole expedition useless and he was almost in tears of chagrin at all their wasted efforts. He felt sorry for the lads killed and for the dying Khakimov; but he now began to be nagged more and more by the problem of how to explain his failure at HQ. The lieutenant could not forget their far from military send-off, the general's short speech in the yard of the house with the high shutters... "My sons!" Now what sort of "sons" were they? Slobs and bunglers! While they had been getting ready, while they had been ploughing through the night, while they had been floundering along the ditch, the dump had disappeared without a trace.

A disgusting state of affairs, to say the least, thought Ivanovsky, frowning as if he had toothache. He was not bothering to dodge the prickly branches of the shrubs any more, but went at them head-on, only stooping slightly. He thought it would have been better if the general had reprimanded him at the very be-

ginning and had sent him to be vetted at Doltsevo, than that he should have involved himself in that ill-fated report. And if such a decision had been taken, it would have been better if the Chief of Staff had given him a harsh order about that dump or had even threatened him with a court martial in the event of failure to carry it out, than to have heard his "You are our last hopes." What was he to do with that hope now? Where could he go with it? This uncomfortable thought kept nagging at his mind, would not let him reconcile himself to his failure and spurred him on to some kind of action. But what could he do?

Crossing the road proved difficult again; from a long way off he could already see a dense mass of troops on the move. It looked like an infantry unit on the march, the columns of soldiers trudging wearily along, carts, waggons, sometimes men on horseback. In the second lane crawled machines and haulage tractors with guns in tow. This dense stream was moving inexorably eastwards, to Moscow, and the lieutenant's heart sank with a presentiment of doom once more. It looked as though they were advancing and had broken through the front... Poor Moscow, how could it hold out against such might? But it would and must find the strength. Otherwise why so much bloodshed, so many lives prematurely sacrificed to it, so much human anguish and suffering? But there was a kind of meaning in it all, surely! There had to be.

Only he saw little meaning in his actions; although during that agonizing night he had covered sixty kilometres, the ammunition dump was no nearer than it had been the day before. Perhaps it was even further away, because then he had had the group in full strength and unexpended determination. But what was left of it now? Even his own strength had waned and, most important of all, the former clarity of purpose had disappeared with the ammunition dump; he simply did not know what to try next or where to go.

However, he must first get through to his men.

Carrying their skis, he and Pivovarov crawled back down the slope to the bottom of that same antitank ditch. To proceed further to the highway would be risky, and they hid behind a successive bend, occasionally looking out from behind it at the sector of the road open to them. There was no sense in looking out too often, the column of troops was tramping past without end or beginning and there could be no question of crossing the road at such a time. Which meant that they had to wait again. And the lieutenant began meekly killing time in the cold, almost in desperation, half a kilometre away from the Germans. His recent impatience was gone; he was ready to stay there till nightfall, he had nowhere he could go in the daytime. Moreover, he had not yet made any decision at all and did not know whether to proceed further or go back across the front line to his own side. He hardly spoke to Pi-

vovarov; a conversation would have prevented him from listening, and hearing was now their sole protection in this endless, snowed-up antitank ditch. From time to time, Ivanovsky took out his clock, which only testified how inexorably fast the time was passing. A freezing winter's night was on the way. In spite of the cold, he very much wanted to sleep. Only now did he realize how exhausted he was after that dash through the night. The nervous tension that had never left him for a second several days running was gradually abating; without realizing it, he even dozed off, leaning back against the cold, snowy slope; but he started suddenly at the sound of Pivovarov's quiet voice.

"...Comrade Lieutenant, it looks like the end."

"Yes? The end?"

Having settled himself on the slope and peering out from behind the embankment, the soldier was watching the road, and his voice sounded encouraging. The lieutenant likewise climbed on to the slope. The road was indeed emptying of troops and the last lorries were slowly disappearing towards the east. Pivovarov and he must run to the hill.

They picked up their skis and trotted along the bottom of the ditch, stepping deep into their own tracks, not yet filled by snow. They were in luck again; they got out on to the empty crown of the road at the right moment and, running across it, disappeared into the ditch. While they ran, they warmed themselves considerably; Ivanovsky's back began sweating, and Pivovarov's face streamed with perspiration again, the big waxen drops trickling down from his brow over his cheeks. Breathing heavily, the soldier smeared them all over his face with the sleeve of his camouflage blouse, but he did not fall behind or get stuck, and for the first time Ivanovsky felt warmly disposed towards him. This frail soldier was showing, after all, a rare zeal, and it would be unfair not to appreciate it.

After the first bend in the ditch, on the hill, Ivanovsky slowed down, gasping out clouds of hot steam in his relief. He could hear the chugging of diesel engines, but this did not worry him. His thoughts were already straining forward to where four of his men were awaiting his return, and the lieutenant's first concern was Khakimov. Of course, it would be wrong to expect him to recover consciousness and get up on his two feet, but still... Or had he died? For some reason, he thought about this without the requisite compassion—the opposite rather, with hope. How much simpler it all would be if Khakimov died! What a good turn he would do them all!

His men were somewhere very near, in the ditch. The lieutenant listened and thought he heard a quiet voice; it sounded like Krasnokutsky. The lieutenant came out from behind the next bend and found himself face to face with Dyubin. The sergeant-major had evidently heard him coming and, with strained attention on his

tanned face, turned round and looked the lieutenant in the eye. Not far away from the side in the snow sat Lukashov, Krasnokutsky and Sudnik. Zayats sat unmoving in the ditch near the sledge carrying Khakimov, his head sadly bowed.

All turned to the new arrivals, but no one said a word; the lieutenant, also silent and without looking at anyone, went to the sledge.

"How's Khakimov?"

"Same as before. Delirious," said Lukashov.

"Have you given him any water?"

"How can we? It's a stomach wound."

Yes, evidently a stomach wound. Which meant that water was not allowed. But what else could they do? Watch him suffering, and suffer with him?

The lieutenant stared intently at Khakimov's pale face with the agonized gap of the half-open, dry lips. He was groaning almost inaudibly, without opening his eyes, and it was not clear whether he was conscious or not.

"He should be covered with a sheepskin coat," said Dyubin from a distance.

"Where are you going to get one?" demanded Lukashov irritably.

"But he'll die."

"Have you been here long?" asked Ivanovsky without turning away from Khakimov.

"For an hour," said Dyubin, and he nodded towards Zayats, "I bust a ski because of him."

"How?"

"We were skirting a forest," said Zayats. "He ran into a bump, crack, and that was that. It wasn't my fault..."

At any other time, it would have been appropriate to give Zayats a good ticking-off for letting the group down twice, but Ivanovsky said nothing this time. He was rather pleased that Dyubin had caught up with the rest, although his relief was badly clouded by their common failure. The lieutenant deliberately avoided mentioning the matter; he dreaded the moment when it would be discovered that the night dash had been to no purpose. He did not have to keep quiet for long, however, although his gloomy aspect did not encourage conversation, and all his men could see this. Nevertheless, the problem of the ammunition dump was bothering the others too. Nearby, in the ditch, the ingenuous Pivovarov was having a rest, and it was on him that all eyes turned. Lukashov was the first to lose patience.

"Well, what's it like over there? Many Germans?" he asked quietly behind the lieutenant's back.

"No Germans. No dump either," replied Pivovarov easily.

"What d'you mean, no dump?"

The lieutenant winced inwardly.

He could not see, but he almost felt physically that the men behind him had frozen in alarm. Unable to stand it any longer, he rose to his feet.

"What is this, Lieutenant? Is it a fact?" Lukashov stood up after him. All the others looked at their commander in extreme dismay, almost in fright.

"Yes, the dump isn't there. They must have moved it somewhere else."

Silence fell. No one said a word. Krasnokutsky spat through his teeth on to the snow. Zayats was still staring at Ivanovsky in bewilderment.

"So we've been taken for a ride!" said Lukashov indignantly.

"What can we do about it?" sighed Krasnokutsky. "Anything can happen in war."

"But perhaps it wasn't there? Perhaps it was somewhere else?" said Lukashov suspiciously, turning to the lieutenant as before.

"It had been there," replied Pivovarov simply. "The fence-posts had been left behind. But the barbed wire was gone."

The lieutenant went away from the sledge, running his eyes over Sudnik, who was staring tensely down into the ditch from the breastwork. The commander was trying not to see Lukashov, but he sensed what a hostile, evil force had got into the senior sergeant, who was in the mood for a scene.

"So there aren't any traces left behind?" asked Dyubin, calmly matter-of-fact.

"There's nothing," said Ivanovsky.

"So what does that mean?.. How could it be?" Lukashov wouldn't let up. "It means somebody's to blame."

The lieutenant turned to him sharply.

"To blame for what?"

"For people knocking themselves out for nothing. Yes, and some got killed..."

"So what do you suggest?" said the lieutenant, putting him in his place with this sharp question.

He could not start an argument with him, since he knew that the present tension could easily flare up into a row; moreover, he could not help feeling that the senior sergeant was very much in the right. But why go into it at length now? It was sickening enough as it was; everybody was taking this failure badly. Moreover, in such cases it was strictly forbidden to express dissatisfaction or indignation in the army; that kind of thing was always put a stop to with the utmost severity.

Lukashov, however, lost his temper; his eyes flashed with rage, his face turned ugly.

"What can I suggest? I'm saying..."

"Then shut up."

The senior sergeant was silent and moved away. The lieutenant sat down on the snow again. It had not been a pleasant conversation, but something that had been haunting him since morning had gone away, everything had somehow resolved itself, although, perhaps, not in the best way possible. They were not asking him any more questions; they had evidently realized that he knew no more than the rest. They silently waited for the next order or decision about what was to be done next. Realizing this, he took out the map. He tried to find something on it, to decide something for himself; he wondered where that damned dump was most likely to have been transferred. But however closely he studied the map, it did not answer any of his questions; the red line of the road soon ran over the edge and he didn't have the adjoining sheet. Here, and further on, there were no doubt plenty of places suitable for an ammunition dump: in the forests, woods, or gullies. Where was he to look for it? He sat there for a long time, thinking, never taking off his knees the unfolded map which the wind was dusting with fine snow. He was no longer studying anything on it, he had simply departed from the now needless conversations with the men and from their enquiring glances. He felt that he must make a decision without delay; as soon as it grew dark, they must get away. Only where to?

"Take over from Sudnik, Zayats. He must be frozen stiff in the wind," he said, when he felt that hostile silence in the group was beginning to last too long.

Zayats jumped to his feet at once and began climbing up to the breastwork, while Sudnik, stirring up the snow, slid down on his behind into the ditch. The cloud he raised enveloped Dyubin, who stood up.

"So what next, Commander?" he asked.

"Meaning what, precisely?" asked Ivanovsky, pretending not to understand, although he knew perfectly well what was bothering the sergeant-major.

"Where are we going next?"

"You're going back," decided the commander simply.

"What, just me?"

"You and the rest. Try and save Khakimov."

"What about you?"

"Me? I'm going to try and find the dump."

"On your own?"

Ivanovsky did not answer the last question straightaway. He did not know whether he would go alone or with someone else, but he had suddenly grasped that it was necessary for the search to continue. He could not return empty-handed; such a return was entirely beyond him.

"No, not alone. There'll be someone else."

"Is that a fact? Perhaps me, Lieutenant?" said Dyubin, as if testing himself with his own decisiveness. But the lieutenant did not answer.

Ivanovsky was tensely arriving at a conclusion that he had failed to reach earlier. Of course, it was the only solution for him: he could not risk all the men; they had done everything they were supposed to have done, and it wasn't their fault that the dump had been moved. It would now be a matter of his honour as a commander, his almost personal duel with German guile, and the men had nothing to do with this. All the more so now that the chances of success were uncertain. From now on, he would begin to act at his own risk; the others must return to the front line.

The lieutenant glanced up from his map and looked straight at Dyubin. Dark with the cold, the sergeant-major's face was calm, the eyes under the tiny peak of the Red-Starred Budyonovka helmet were calmly expectant and undemanding. He seemed to be saying: "If you take me, well and good; if not, I shan't insist." The lieutenant almost wanted to take the sergeant-major with him; a better companion could probably not be found here. But then he would have to appoint Lukashov as senior over the departing group, and for some reason he did not want to do so. He had learned a thing or two about Lukashov during their journey and had developed a strong prejudice against him.

This meant that Dyubin would have to stay with the group.

Very few of them were left to go back; in any case they had to look after the severely wounded Khakimov, their return journey was unlikely to be easier than the one here, and the lieutenant very much wanted them to get safely back to their own side. It was therefore more sensible to rely on the experienced and well-balanced Sergeant-Major Dyubin.

"No, Sergeant-Major," said the lieutenant after a prolonged pause. "You will be in charge of the rest. The one going with me will be ... Pivovarov."

Somewhat surprised, all turned their heads and looked at Pivovarov, who was lying on his side. He seemed embarrassed by the lieutenant's words and sat up.

"Right, Pivovarov?"

"Yes," he replied, his face flushing.

"Fine," said the lieutenant, satisfied that everything had been sorted out so quickly.

Afterwards, he was to wonder many times why this vital choice should have fallen almost unconsciously on that young soldier. Why couldn't he have chosen the sapper Sudnik as his assistant, or the tall, powerful Krasnokutsky? Could the unprotesting submissiveness of that weakling really have been all that determined his

choice? Or was the lieutenant influenced by that day's dash across the road together, when they had shared danger, and the first disappointment, now common to all?

None the less, the choice had been made. Pivovarov somehow pulled himself together immediately, looked more glum or more serious, and sat quietly there in the trampled snowdrift.

"Well, it's your business," said Dyubin. "How am I to report it to HQ?"

"I'll write a note," said Ivanovsky.

He couldn't find any paper and he only had a captured German propelling pencil. The sergeant-major had to tear a sheet out of his own soiled note-pad; on this the lieutenant wrote after a moment's thought: "The object was not in its place. The group has sustained losses, I'm sending it back. I'm continuing the search with one man. Propose to return within forty-eight hours. Ivanovsky. 29.11.41."

"Here. Give that to the Chief of Staff."

"You'll take the grenades, of course?"

"Yes. A grenade and the couple of bottles. Pivovarov, take Sudnik's bottles. Give the grenade to me."

The sergeant-major unclipped the antitank grenade from his belt and the lieutenant immediately fastened it to his own with a cord.

"And some grub in reserve?"

"Grub too. Give me some rusks. Two cans of preserves. You'll be having breakfast in your mess-room."

"God willing," sighed Krasnokutsky.

"Only watch out as you cross the line. Don't run into anything again."

"That goes without saying," agreed Dyubin quietly.

"Well, it's getting dark; you can move off. But we'll sit here a bit longer. What's it like on the road, Zayats?"

"Something going along with headlights. One or more—can't see clearly."

The sergeant-major tied up his pack. Pivovarov put rusks into his pack and two big bottles of kerosene rolled up in cloths. Without waiting to be ordered, Lukashov and Krasnokutsky went up to Khakimov.

"Look after him," said the lieutenant to Dyubin. "Let's hope he holds out till morning."

"Of course!"

"That's all, then. Get going!"

"Well, all the best, Lieutenant!" Dyubin turned round and at once gave the order to his men. "Pick him up! The skis, take the skis. Lift him up. Higher, higher! That's it!.."

They lifted Khakimov up and made their way out of the ditch with difficulty. On the breastwork, Dyubin looked round

again; his farewell was hasty and awkward. Ivanovsky waved.

"Good luck."

When they had disappeared, with the sergeant-major's high, pointed hood the last to go down behind the parapet, Ivanovsky sat down in the snow. He felt particularly glad that Dyubin had not gone missing altogether, had caught up with the group and was now with those who were returning. He would be a sensible and humane commander who was bound to get his men back home to their own side. He would manage fine with Pivovarov, who was still standing in the ditch and looking over the high breastwork. To destroy the awkwardness caused by the departure of the others, the lieutenant said with uncharacteristic chattiness:

"Sit down, lad, we'll have a breather. What's your first name?"

"Pyotr."

"And mine's Igor. Well, maybe we'll be lucky. What do you think?"

"We might be," said Pivovarov hesitantly, wiping the stock of his rifle; and he heaved a quiet, uneven sigh.

"Good, we'll have a bite, while there's time—it means there'll be less to carry," said Ivanovsky, and Pivovarov crouched down and began to unfasten the pack.

Chapter Nine

Half an hour later, when it was really dark, they emerged from their snowy refuge. Both were shivering, their legs were frozen and they wanted to get going on their skis to warm themselves up. First, however, they had to look round. Towards night, the traffic on the road had decreased somewhat; single lorries were passing, some with their side lamps shining weakly. It was quiet and desolate all round; the woods in the snowy distance were veiled by the evening gloom; the overcast, starless sky hung low over the snowy nocturnal spaces. Ivanovsky decided to head east parallel to the road, not letting it out of sight and observing the traffic. He thought that the dump should be betrayed by the lorries, as it had been that autumn.

They quickly descended their hill and went through the powdery snow across the dale. Twenty minutes was long enough for them to get warm and even feel slightly tired. The previous night was beginning to tell on them. Moreover, as distinct from yesterday, Ivanovsky's wounded leg began to hurt more as soon as he was on the move, and he unconsciously used it more carefully, putting more weight on the left one. True, he was still trying to accustom himself to his pain and thought that he would manage somehow, as long as his leg didn't let him down. But, as they climbed the next hill, the lieutenant felt in need of a rest. He relaxed his leg

slightly, transferring his weight on to the sound limb and, so that Pivovarov should not suspect anything as he came up behind, he pretended to be surveying the terrain, although there was no need to do so. The road was right beside them, it was deserted, and there was little to be seen in front; a strong east wind was buffeting his face and bringing the tears to his eyes.

"Well, how are we, eh, Pivovarov?" asked the lieutenant in a deliberately facetious tone of voice.

"All right."

"Warmed up?"

"Steamed up, even."

"Let's carry on."

Looking to either side from time to time, they carried on for another hour, skirted the fringe of a grove, a pine-wood and some buildings by the road—after being fired on from the farmhouse on the previous day, Ivanovsky was trying to keep as far away as possible from human habitation. The road ran straight most of the way and this helped them get their bearings, the lieutenant only occasionally glancing at his compass.

His mood even improved. Pivovarov followed on his heels, not falling back by so much as a single pace. The next time he made a halt, Ivanovsky asked with some animation:

"Pivovarov, what have you seen of life?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. What have you seen of life?"

Pivovarov shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing."

"But have you read books, at least?"

"I've read some books," he replied after a pause as if recalling something. "All of Jules Verne, Conan Doyle, Walter Scott, Mark Twain..."

"And Gaidar?"

"And Gaidar. And I read as much of Dumas as I could get."

"Aha!" said the lieutenant in astonishment, and he even looked at Pivovarov with a certain respect. "And when did you have time for so much reading?"

"I fell ill in my sixth form at school and I was away from school for half a year. I read everything that was in the library. I had books brought to me from the library."

Yes, it was probably a great thing to be ill for half a year and read a whole library. However often Ivanovsky had dreamed of being ill in childhood, and in college too, he had never managed to be off sick for more than three days running. His health had always been good and he had not read much, although good books always thrilled him to the core. He had never in his life had occasion to read anything better than Gaidar. That was in childhood, too. Then

he had no time for fiction and took to books of a different kind.

It was still very quiet around them, and calm, as it is calm only a long way from the front line. Ivanovsky was now skiing along without the feverish haste of the day before, overcoming a noticeable heaviness in his legs and body and the ever-present pain that went with each movement. True, the pain was bearable for the time being. In order not to brood on it, the lieutenant tried to distract himself with something else. Now and again his thoughts went out to the soldiers returning to their own side under Dyubin. They must already be going along the river, by the flood plain. It would be a good thing if the ski-trail had not been obliterated by the snow; it would help them keep their bearings. Dyubin, however, had probably memorized the route anyway, and if anything happened, the map would come to the rescue. A map is a precious thing in the field, and it's a pity there aren't always enough of them. He kept wondering how Khakimov was getting on. They must be having a hell of a time with him. Especially when crossing the front line. With him there, they couldn't jump up or dash forward on their skis; they had to crawl all the time. If only they could make it. But Dyubin would and must get through. Dyubin would also explain their failure to the Chief of Staff and would somehow vindicate the group and its commander. Although what had the commander to do with it? Who would have thought that everything could change so much in ten days and that the Germans would move the dump?

Ivanovsky did not personally consider himself to blame at all; he had done everything he possibly could. Even so, a kind of foul canker of guilt was still gnawing his vitals. It still looked as though the lieutenant had overlooked something and had somehow not justified the trust placed in him. It was this that embarrassed him most of all. The lieutenant positively winced at the thought that nothing might come of his scheme.

Ivanovsky knew perfectly well what it was to ruin a good opinion of oneself in such a thoughtless way. It had happened once in his life that, having abused trust, he had never been able to win back the good-will of someone well disposed to him. And no repentance on his part had any meaning.

Not long before it happened, Igor had turned fourteen and he had been living for over four years in Kublichi, a quiet little village on the Polish border, where his father was a veterinary surgeon at the Frontier Station. There were few distractions in the village. Igor went to school and made friends with the other boys, but spent most of his time in the stables. Horses had been perhaps his biggest attachment for many years, the all-consuming diversion of his adolescence. How often he had groomed and bathed them, how many of them he had ridden in the saddle or bareback! For

three years running he thought and dreamed about horses; each day after lessons he ran to the stables and only went to bed so as to be there again next day for the arrival of the duty groom. The frontier guards sometimes joked that Igor was the 24-hour stables duty officer, and he would indeed have become one had he not been a schoolboy.

There were always heaps of interesting things to do in the stables, beginning with feeding, watering, curry-combing and brushing, and ending with the ceremonial inspection, the bustling about of the soldiers and the captiousness of the officers checking the cleanliness of the animals' flanks with handkerchiefs. There was something tremendously attractive about riding and vaulting and, of course, he was thrilled to bits by the sabring of willow-wands on the parade-ground behind the stables, when the cavalrymen raced at full gallop along a row of tubs of willow-wands, slashing off the tops with their sabres to the right and left of them. And oh, the trick-riding of the most dashing horseman in the detachment, the famous Lieutenant Khakasov!

But he watched the parades, the sabring and the trick-riding from the side-lines, not taking part in them because of his tender years. He was not allowed into the ranks and not even once was he permitted to ride past with a sabre. Bathing the horses was another matter. On the green bank of the lake, near some sandy shallows, there stood a gnawed old tethering-rail, and nearly every hot day they brought up the sweating, tired horses, eager to get into the water. The bathing would begin, and here Igor Ivanovsky used to let himself go, splashing about until the last horse had come out of the lake.

He usually arrived on Milka, a young chestnut mare with a long-legged, playful foal. Milka belonged to Mityaev, the section commander, with whom a relationship had developed of a kind most unusual between a young lad and a grown-up man. Although he was on short service, unlike the other twenty-year-old frontier guards, Mityaev seemed almost an old man to Igor with his wrinkled face, heavy gait and dilatoriness of the elderly villager. Mityaev hailed from Siberia; he had grown-up daughters at home and he would have been called up and would have finished his service long ago had it not been for a muddle with the documents, according to which he was twenty-two years of age. Mityaev himself could not explain how this had happened and merely swore about the drunken clerk in the church by whose good graces he was having to serve with boys young enough to be his sons-in-law.

Horses were no novelty to Mityaev; he had doubtless seen a great many in his time and he willingly entrusted his Milka to the vet's competent son. Igor fed, groomed, washed and exercised her, while Mityaev taught him, complimented him, and sometimes,

pulling on his self-rolled cigarette, had a rest in the smoking-room. Sometimes he interceded for his helper with Igor's father when the latter upbraided him for long absence, as a result of which, needless to say, he was behind at school. His relationship with Mityaev worked out as well as could be wished for on the whole, and his father often remarked that he would no doubt be replaced by that Siberian. Igor did not object; he considered that Mityaev was really better than his father who had divorced his mother, drank at times and certainly did not spoil his son with attention.

The usual washing and scrubbing of the horses on the lake was once disturbed by a minor incident: a boat arrived at the bathing-place. Sergeant-Major Belush brought it on a cart drawn by two horses; he tried it out in the water and said that the boat belonged to Zarubin, the commandant, and that no one else must dare to lay a finger on it. To keep it safe, Belush attached a chain and moored the boat to the tethering-rail. No one knew why, but the boat lay there on the shore nearly all summer. Zarubin did not use it, and the village boys were burning with eagerness to sail round the lake in it.

One evening, when the horses had already been bathed and were standing at the tethering-rail and the duty officers had gone to station headquarters for dinner, Igor picked up the rods and lines he had brought from home and went to the narrows to catch some perch. They were not biting well, however, and he was about to move to another spot, when his school friends Kolka Borovsky and Yasha Finkel came out of an alder-grove. After a brief talk they let it be understood that there was a possibility of swiping the commandant's boat and sailing over to the lake's opposite bank with the big dark forest on it where none of them had ever been before. Igor thought this plan very attractive—every village boy dreamed of going to that far shore—but it was difficult of access; the way was barred by a treacherous, squelchy marsh in the mouth of the narrows, in which, it was said, a water-sprite lived! It was a temptation to take the boat, but Mityaev, on duty at the tethering-rail, was responsible for the boat to Captain Zarubin personally. When Igor told the boys about this, it turned out that they had already seen Mityaev asleep on a horse-blanket under a bush, and as for the lock, Kolka promptly laid in front of Igor the big key to his father's woodshed, which was secured by exactly the same kind of lock as Zarubin's boat. Igor had only to take that key and open the lock.

They had no oars; all they found was a long pole. They quietly dragged the boat to the shallows, jumped in, pushed off with the pole and began paddling with their hands. The boat sailed out to the middle of the lake. They then discovered that the timbers had become excessively dry on the beach and rivulets of water

were trickling through the sides. There was nothing with which they could bale out; they tried splashing the water out with their hands, but the boat's stern was sinking lower and lower and soon the boys had to abandon it in a hurry. After swallowing their fill of warm water, they somehow got to shore again. The boat slowly sank.

Mityaev was fast asleep by the tethering-rail and heard nothing. The boys dried themselves in a secluded spot and went to their various homes towards evening. On the next day, a search began for the missing boat; it so happened that someone had seen Temkin, the village drunk and rowdy, near the bathing place, and a charge was filed against him. They also wanted to question Igor, who had been at the tethering-rail since morning, but Mityaev could not even imagine his favourite as a thief and vouched for him. When, a day later, Igor, with his heart in his boots, confessed to Mityaev, the latter did not believe him at first. Igor had to point out the place where the boat had sunk on to the oozy bed, not very deep down. It was quickly raised and towed to shore. On seeing it, Mityaev simply spat into the sand and walked away, not even looking at his adored helpmate. The two-year friendship ended there. Up until demobilization, Mityaev never said a single word to the boy, ignored him altogether, did not answer his greetings and walked straight past if they happened to meet. Igor did not take offence; he knew that he had well and truly deserved Mityaev's contempt.

They found their way barred by a thin plantation of young pines, but quickly skied through it between the long, even rows. Then they both stopped dead. On the very fringe, there was a road along which lorries were crawling away from them, slowly lurching over pot-holes. At first Ivanovsky thought that he had lost his way and come out on to the highway; then he suddenly realized that this was not the highway, but a branch road. Why were the lorries using it?

Keeping under cover, he did not stay long on the fringe of the wood. The lorries were passing very close to him; the one in front had its headlamps on, its big covered body swaying over the uneven surface. The three following it were also covered; there was no telling what was inside them. That they should be turning off the highway gave the lieutenant grounds for hope. Without going nearer the road, he turned off along the fringe of the plantation and followed them.

He was now going very slowly stopping at frequent intervals to listen. The distant, reverberating roar of diesel engines was still audible for a while; then, muffled by a gust of wind, it suddenly died down. Ivanovsky adjusted the strap carrying the heavy anti-

tank grenade and looked round at Pivovarov. He was close by, silent in the foreboding of danger and trying to hold his breath.

"Let's have a look what's up there. Fall back a little."

Pivovarov nodded, straightening the rifle on his back; the sling lay diagonally across his narrow chest, white in the camouflage blouse. He had proved physically frail, of course, but a tougher man would probably also have given up by now. His skis swishing through the snow, Ivanovsky went along the fringe of the wood.

The trees soon ended; in front of them was a brook or stream with bushes on its banks. With the noticeable effort of a tired man, Ivanovsky crossed it and went further over the field. To his surprise, he saw the road—two ruts cut deep into the snow by lorry wheels. In order not to cross it, while keeping it in view, he turned back and went over the field at a distance.

The village appeared unexpectedly; without a single sound, without a glimmer of light, there suddenly loomed up in the grey dusk the roof of a barn, and then another one after it. The lieutenant was already cursing himself for his carelessness—he should have kept further away from the village. He was about to turn off to one side, when round the corner of the barn he glimpsed the characteristic outlines of a tracked cross-country vehicle. There was something else, too: incomprehensibly cumbersome in the dusk, a thin flexible pole was sticking up from it into the sky. On looking harder, the lieutenant recognized an aerial. Of course, there could not be a dump of any kind in a village, but some German unit of the rear or on the move might well be billeted for the night.

"See that?" said Ivanovsky to his partner.

"Yes."

"What d'you make of it?"

Pivovarov merely shrugged his shoulders; he didn't know any more than the lieutenant, who was now treating him as an equal. Had there been five or ten men with him, Ivanovsky would never have allowed himself such familiarity; but Pivovarov was something more than just a private soldier to him now. He was his first assistant, his deputy and his chief adviser.

Lifting his skis alternately off the ground, Ivanovsky turned right round in the field. Pivovarov did likewise and they began a sharp detour. After a minute's skiing over the snowy field, however, the lieutenant stopped at the thought, "Supposing that's a big German HQ?" This would be even more worthwhile than the ill-fated ammunition dump, which they did not know how to find in the night.

He stood for a moment in the wind, considering what to do. Pivovarov waited beside him. He evidently knew that his commander was deciding something vital to them both and he awaited that decision with calm, soldierly self-possession. Ivanovsky was

thinking that it would, of course, be more sensible to avoid that hornets' nest, but perhaps they should first steal up a little nearer and reconnoitre; something useful might turn up.

While they were standing there undecided, somewhere in the village a dim patch of light flared up, illumined something on the snow and promptly went out again. That chance glimmer explained exactly nothing, but it gave direction and location in the darkness. That was evidently the street, and the lieutenant suddenly decided to go as close to it as possible to find out what was going on there.

"Right. Pivovarov, fall back a little. And follow me, slowly."

Pivovarov nodded in assent. Ivanovsky determinedly pushed off with his sticks and headed for the village.

First he came to an old, dilapidated fence, through a gap in which he glided into a kitchen garden, where he saw in the nocturnal twilight some scraggy trees and bushes, rather like the boundary strip between two kitchen gardens. He turned off towards the trees and, under cover of them, skied slowly over the shallow snow towards the dark silhouettes of some buildings. It was still quiet all round and rather cold, the wind was gusty, and the thin snowflakes sped slantwise through the air. No distinct sounds were audible, but even so, from certain inexplicable signs Ivanovsky sensed the presence in the village of strangers, who could now only be Germans. Feeling that he was on the verge of a discovery, he warily approached the buildings.

The snow-covered roof of a barn loomed up quite close to him; nearby stood a lopsided hay-stack propped up with poles. The trees on the boundary strip between the gardens suddenly ended there; the end one was a spreading pear-tree with a thick trunk, conspicuous among the slender cherry-trees. Having noted it from a distance, Ivanovsky decided to crouch down and wait behind this pear. But before he had reached it, a figure in a long, unfastened coat appeared beside the hay-stack from goodness knows where, and he realized with a start that it was a German. The German stopped dead in surprise, peering intently towards him, but at this point he evidently calmed down and said gutturally:

"*Es schien ein Russ...*"

Ivanovsky did not understand and must have tugged too violently at the stock of the submachine gun on his chest. The bolt clicked loudly in the silence. Realizing his blunder, the German uttered a strangled, almost terrifying cry and dashed over the snow away from the stack diagonally across the kitchen garden to the neighbouring house. Momentarily at a loss, Ivanovsky crouched down, and only just in time: a single shot banged out from the building and the bullet smashed noisily into the frozen branches of the bushes. He was already prepared, however, and fired from a

kneeling position at the grey corner behind the fence, then let go another burst, lower, at the running man, who was just about to vanish into the shadow of the building. Ivanovsky's last bullets were, however, unnecessary; the German had already dived head-first into the snow and was lying still. Ivanovsky swung his left ski round in an about-turn and grabbed one stick. He dropped the second one on to the snow in his haste and had only just bent down when a ruddy flash appeared again in the dusk of the yard and he gasped quietly at a deep, sharp blow in the back. Realizing that he had been hit, he skied frantically from the kitchen garden towards where Pivovarov was waiting for him.

Clearly confused, the Germans gave him a quarter of a minute's precious time. He had already raced over half of the boundary strip and they were only just beginning to run out of the houses into the kitchen garden. Someone peremptorily barked an order and five of them immediately set off in pursuit of him. He looked round and saw them distinctly; for a second he hesitated, wondering whether to stop and slow them down with some fire from his automatic or to get away into the darkness. But he could not go faster any more, he was weakening rapidly with pain and he could hardly control his skis.

The Germans fired several times behind him, frequently and not very noisily with what seemed to be pistols; but he got away from them nevertheless, as he was now a difficult target. Even so, one bullet smacked home somewhere at his feet. Without looking back, he crouched down and, with all his rapidly waning strength, tried to get out of that kitchen garden as quickly as possible. Another bullet tautened its whining string just over his head; he threw up his submachine gun in order to fire a burst, but from somewhere in front of him came a powerful, reverberant bang, and then another. He realized joyfully, almost as if already rescued, that it was Pivovarov; he would have recognized a shot from his rifle anywhere. From the darkness again, almost to meet him, three shots flashed in quick succession. They passed very close, but he was confident that Pivovarov's bullets would not touch him.

"Hurry up, Comrade Lieutenant!"

Ivanovsky collapsed just short of the fence, not because of the pain in his chest, which was rapidly spreading all over the right side of his body, but because he was out of breath. He was gasping for air. But he knew that Pivovarov was already somewhere very near and would not leave him.

Spitting out the snow, he tried to stand up, but his legs were strangely heavy and he was hampered by his skis, which had crossed when he fell. One of them had come off his foot, and so he tugged at the other and freed it, too, from its fastening. Several shots banged behind him, but he was apparently not being pur-

sued; Pivovarov had pinned them down. He ran up to Ivanovsky out of the dark.

"Comrade Lieutenant!"

"Quiet! Give me a hand!"

"I got one of them! Just let them come this way now!"

He didn't seem particularly surprised that Ivanovsky was hit and helped him to his feet. He was clearly worried about something else and wasn't even trying to hide it. He didn't even seem to realize how easily they could both be killed just at that moment.

The lieutenant wanted and was about to pick up his skis, but again his head whirled and he dug his shoulder into the soft, frosty snow. Only now realizing that his commander was in a bad way and kicking the skis off his feet, Pivovarov rushed to his aid again.

"Got it bad, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"It's all right, it's all right," Ivanovsky forced himself to say. "Hold me up..."

They had to get away from there as quickly as possible; the Germans could overtake them at any moment. Pivovarov was suddenly silent and, supporting the lieutenant's heavy body, led him into the darkness as far away from the village as possible into the open field. Ivanovsky obediently trailed along over the snow; he kept stumbling, his head whirled drunkenly and he began to feel sick. He twice spat something dark and fluid on to the snow, not realizing at first that it was blood. "I've really had it! I've really had it!" he thought almost with malice, as if about someone else, not himself.

They did not look round, but they didn't need to in order to hear that the uproar had not died down and there was shouting behind them. True, there was no shooting, but the sounds of excited voices spurred them on more than anything. The Germans must be scattering out to the fence or, perhaps, following them. Ivanovsky was damp with sweat and blood, a big dark stain had seeped through the thin material of his camouflage blouse and he was panting for breath, spitting bloody gobs on to the snow from time to time. They both fell down several times, but Pivovarov, quickly recovering his breath, would jump up and seize the lieutenant under the arms; then they would erratically stagger into the grey, frosty darkness again, weaving over the wind-blasted winter field.

When both of them were completely exhausted, the lieutenant spat out a bloody foam, moaned "Stop!" and fell on his side in the snow. Pivovarov went down next to him. Nothing could be heard anywhere now and there was nothing to be seen; it was even impossible to tell where the village was. They seemed to have reached the end of the world where there were neither Russians nor Germans, and Pivovarov, recovering his breath, sat up in the snow.

"I'll bandage you up now," he said, fumbling in his pockets for a field dressing. "Where did they get you?"

"In the chest. Here, under my arm..."

"Never mind, never mind. In a jiffy. I'll bandage you. But I gave that German what for... The other one did a bunk... Fired off a whole round."

Ivanovsky lay down on his back and unfastened the strap of his jerkin. Pivovarov felt his body with cold hands. The blood, freely soaking his clothes, was already beginning to cool and it burned in the cold like ice. However, it could have been the caked snow in his garments that was burning. The lieutenant shivered from time to time as if in a fever, but suffered in silence. Pivovarov tightly bound his chest with three bandages, firmly tying the ends.

"Is it very painful?"

"Of course, it is," answered Ivanovsky irritably. "That's it, fasten the strap."

Pivovarov helped the commander to tidy himself up, fastened up the belt round his jerkin and tugged down the camouflage blouse. The lieutenant gradually began to get warm again, although his body was still afflicted by a fine nervous tremor that hampered his breathing.

"You shouldn't have gone there," said Pivovarov, wiping his bloodstained hands on his baggy camouflage trousers.

"No? Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"Because I didn't know," Pivovarov shrugged.

"Did I know, then?" snapped the lieutenant. He realized that he was turning nasty and unfair and that Pivovarov had not had anything to do with it; it was his own fault. But the very awareness of his culpability made Ivanovsky more angry than ever. Yes, now he had boobed, had condemned himself and this soldier to death, had messed up the whole mission of the ammunition dump and had achieved nothing in the village. But he could not have acted otherwise, avoiding the dump, HQ and this village, thereby saving his own skin. In such a war, that would be sacrilege.

"Give me the ammunition discs. And the submachine gun too. I'll carry them," said Pivovarov quietly, and Ivanovsky tacitly agreed since, of course, he could not carry them himself. Mustering the pathetic remnants of his strength, he turned round in order to sit up on the snow.

"Well, we must get away."

"Yes. Let's go there. The way we came," said Pivovarov briskly. "There's a village somewhere, I'll bet."

"A village?"

"We must get to a village. One without Germans in it."

Pivovarov was probably right, thought Ivanovsky. All they could do now was get into a village somewhere among their own people;

there was nowhere else they could go. He did not at once realize how radically this decision had changed all his plans. Their main concern now must be to avoid falling into German hands. He was never going to see that ammunition dump again...

Chapter Ten

They advanced knee-deep through the snow, without skis, weakly trudging along, holding on to one another, all but falling into the snow out of exhaustion. Pivovarov was nearing the end of his tether, but he did not leave the lieutenant, supporting him with his right hand, in his left dragging the submachine gun and the rifle by their slings, and carrying on his shoulder the pack, which kept slipping down all the time. Ivanovsky was almost unable to bear the agony any longer, but he gritted his teeth, forcing himself to use up his last strength and struggled on and on, if only to get as far away as possible from that ill-fated village.

Meanwhile, snow had begun falling heavily in the night, everything around was white, the turbid sky joined a turbid earth that was shot with a twinkling, shimmering stream of snowflakes. It was impossible to look up. But the wind was weaker than the day before and, moreover, it seemed to be blowing behind them as they blindly carried on over the field, stopping at intervals to recover their breath. Still spitting blood, Ivanovsky sadly noticed how his strength was waning and he trudged on stubbornly, hoping for some kind of shelter so as not to die out there in the open field. He did not want to die. As long as he was alive, he was prepared to struggle on all night, for twenty-four hours, for an eternity, just so as to survive, to live through it, to return to his own people.

Pivovarov was no doubt feeling the same way, but he said nothing to the lieutenant, he merely supported the commander as best as he could, straining what was left of his far from superhuman strength. Under other circumstances, the lieutenant would probably have been surprised where he had got it from, that puny, exhausted-looking young man; but he himself was now weaker than Pivovarov and was entirely dependent on his limited capacities. He knew that if they should fall and fail to get up again, they would crawl forward on their bellies, because salvation lay ahead, whereas behind them there was only death.

They stopped in uncertainty once or twice in a dale where the snow was rather deep. Pivovarov, half supporting the lieutenant, was trying to identify something in front of them that the lieutenant had not yet noticed. Then, peering through the thick, whirling night blizzard, Ivanovsky also began to make out a vague, dark blob whose size and distance it was equally impossible to de-

termine. It could have been a bush just ahead, or a building in the distance, or perhaps a tree—a fir on the edge of a forest. Nonetheless, the blob put them both on the alert and, after a moment's thought, Pivovarov lowered Ivanovsky on to his side.

"I'll go and have a look..."

The lieutenant did not answer; it was agony for him to talk, his chest was wheezing and he kept spitting on to the snow. He wiped his wet lips with the sleeve of his cape and a dark blood-stain was left on the white, wet material.

"This must be it... If blood comes out of your mouth, you haven't long to live," he thought dismally as he lay in the snow. His head drooped and fiery orange patches danced before his eyes. But his consciousness remained clear, it made him struggle for himself and for that soldier, now his saviour. The saviour himself could hardly keep on his feet; but so far the lieutenant could not reproach him for anything—back there, in the village and in the field, Pivovarov had behaved in the most commendable way. Now, feeling his advantage over the commander, he had somehow livened up, had become more self-confident, more efficient, and the lieutenant thought with assurance that he had not been mistaken in his choice of an assistant.

He waited patiently for several minutes, listening dismally to the strange gurgling in his punctured chest. Pivovarov's pack was lying beside him and the lieutenant thought that they should empty it and throw out part of their load. They did not need big reserves now: personal arms, cartridges and grenades were essential.

The incendiary, bottles were evidently no longer needed. But he was so weak that he could not even unfasten the pack and merely bowed his head weakly to the ground. He did not at first notice Pivovarov's white shade appear silently out of the snowy darkness, joyfully saying: "Comrade Lieutenant, a village bath-house! It's a bath-house there, you understand, and nobody in it!"

"A bath-house—that's good," thought Ivanovsky, and silently began struggling to his feet. Pivovarov picked up the pack and his automatic, helped the lieutenant to stand up; then they set off for the misty silhouette of the bath-house.

It was indeed a small village bath-house built of fir-logs and smelling of wood-smoke. Pivovarov kicked aside the prop with his foot, and the low door swung open. Stooping, clutching at the walls, Ivanovsky went in the stifling darkness, ran his hands over the walls and found a smooth drying pole and dried birch-switches. Pivovarov meanwhile opened another door and there was a strong smell of smoke, ashes and rotting birch-wood. Pivovarov went in and, groping about in the darkness, called the lieutenant.

"This way. There're benches in here... I'll just put them together..."

Holding firmly on to the door-jamb, Ivanovsky crossed the threshold and, feeling the benches, stretched out on them, his boots touching the wall.

"Close the door."

"Right away, right away... Here's some straw. Let's put it under your head..."

He silently raised his head, allowed an armful of straw to be pushed under it and closed his eyes weakly. Soon he could not tell whether he was dozing off or losing consciousness; the flickering orange lights before his eyes had intensified, his head whirled and he felt sick. He tried to turn on to his side, but he could no longer cope with the weight of his own body and he fainted, really losing consciousness this time...

Coming to was a long and agonizing experience; he was shivering and very thirsty, but it was some time before he could open his dry lips and ask for water. It cost him an effort to open his eyes when he sensed a movement near him—Pivovarov's white shape emerged from the first room with his hood thrown back, submachine gun in hand. It was dark-grey in the bath-house, but the tiny window in the wall was shining as if it were daytime; all the chinks in the changing-room were letting the light through and the lieutenant knew that it was morning. Pivovarov, however, was preoccupied with something outside, stooping down, putting his eyes to the tiny window and peering at something.

Ivanovsky tried to turn over on to his side, and started coughing. Pivovarov jumped back from the window and turned to the wounded man.

"How are you, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"All right, all right..."

He waited for Pivovarov to continue, but the soldier asked no more questions, was silent at once and, stooping down to the window as before, said in a suppressed whisper:

"That's Germans over there in the village."

"What village?"

"The one over there. That's the end house behind the willow-tree. There's Germans wandering about."

"Far off?"

"About two hundred paces."

Indeed, if there were Germans two hundred paces away and they had not discovered the pair of them yet, then they could consider themselves lucky in that bath-house. True, it had been night so far, but day was breaking and who could tell how long they would stay there unnoticed?

"Never mind. Just don't stick your head out."

"I've closed the door." Pivovarov nodded towards the entrance. "I've propped it up with a spade."

"Good. Is there any water?"

"Yes," answered Pivovarov readily. "There's a tub here. I've already drunk some. Ice in it, though."

"Give me some, quick."

Pivovarov clumsily gave him to drink out of a tin; the water smelt of birch-switches and the wet leaves stuck to his lips. It was horrible, like water out of a puddle, and the lieutenant's innards felt horrible too; something was welling up in his chest and he could only breathe with difficulty now. He couldn't even cough to clear his lungs.

He felt better after drinking, however, and his mind was more lucid. He looked round him. The bath-house was tiny, with a low, sooty ceiling and no less sooty walls. In the corner, by the door, there was a black pile of stones on the stove with a tub of water standing nearby. There were some forgotten rags hanging from the low drying pole. Of course, someone could turn up for any reason and discover them at any moment. Why hadn't he realized earlier that a bath-house couldn't be far away from a village and there could be Germans in this village too?

"What can you see out there?" he said in a muffled voice to Pivovarov, who was now motionless in the changing-room near the door slit.

"They've just come out of that house... Two of them... Lighting cigarettes... They've gone off somewhere."

"Germans?"

"Of course."

"Never mind. Just keep watching. They won't get us that easily."

Of course, he knew the worthlessness of his facile reassurance, but what else could he do? He only knew that if the Germans burst in on them, they would have to fight them off as long as their ammunition lasted, and then... But perhaps they wouldn't burst in. Perhaps they would leave the village altogether. Strange as it might seem, but his attitude had changed, he felt a kind of unnatural calm so close to the Germans, as if he had already lost the sense of urgency and the obsessive impatience of the last few days. Now all this had suddenly vanished—had vanished, no doubt, together with his strength; and having lost that, he had also lost his spiritual drive, his enthusiasm. He was now trying to weigh everything up more carefully, to check before acting, because any mistake could be his last. He clearly realized that the most vital thing of all was the readiness to wait. In the daytime, in the snowy field, on the outskirts of the village, there was no alternative but to store up patience until nightfall so that they could then make a bid for freedom.

But waiting also called for strength; he must somehow hang on

to his wavering consciousness, he must preserve his stamina by sheer willpower. This was not easy even for a fit man like Pivovarov. In this trap, in full view of the Germans, it was hard to keep one's nerve, thought the lieutenant, watching as the soldier moved about the bath-house, now to the window in the wall, now into the changing-room with its many slits in the timbering. He looked frightened, and each time Ivanovsky glanced at him, he thought that the Germans must be coming. Presumably to reassure the commander and himself too, Pivovarov kept saying aloud from time to time:

"Someone's come out on to the path... Going to the well, by the look of it. Ah, a woman with a bucket..."

And, a minute later:

"Oho! They're coming out. No, they've stopped. They're standing there. They've gone off somewhere..."

"Where to?"

"Devil knows! They went behind the barn."

"Never mind, don't worry. They won't come here."

He did not take his submachine gun from Pivovarov, since the other would make better use of it, and in any case he still had the grenade. It was the grenade that mattered most now. He unfastened it from his belt and put it down beside the bench. The rifle had been stood against the wall near his head. Everything was ready, and all they had to do was wait patiently and hope for luck.

"If they poke their noses in here, they won't get out again," said Pivovarov, going up to the window. "True, neither will we."

Ivanovsky grasped what Pivovarov meant and asked suddenly:

"D'you want to live?"

"Live?" The soldier was almost astonished and then sighed. "I wouldn't mind. But..."

Exactly—but! That BUT was like a diabolical curse on their young lives; they just couldn't get away from it. On that memorable Sunday morning it had cruelly split the world into two halves, on one of which there was life with all its joys, unsophisticated but so necessary to men, and on the other—untimely death, terrible in its commonplaceness. That was where it had all started and, whatever might happen next, in subsequent predicaments, everything inevitably must come up against that fateful BUT. In order to get around it somehow, to outwit it, to prevail over it on their way and carry on living longer, incredible efforts, toils, and torments would be called for... Needless to say, in order to survive, it was necessary to win, but one could win only by surviving—that was the vicious circle into which people had been hurled by the war. Defending life and one's homeland, it was necessary to kill, and to kill not one person, but many; and the more were killed, the more reliable the existence of one and all became.

Survival through the destruction of the enemy—there was clearly no other solution in war.

Supposing, as now, he was unable even to kill? He could only kill himself, and there was no getting away from it, he was already a bad soldier. However much he reassured himself and Pivovarov, however much he drove the two of them on to further efforts, he could not deny that with his wounded chest he was not fighting fit any more.

What was he to do? Die quietly in this bath-house?

No, anything but that! It would be almost vile to himself, to this soldier whom he had also condemned to death, and to all his men. He would not allow it as long as he was alive.

He even took fright at this thought and came round from a brief faint. He must get on with something, and immediately, without losing a single moment of life, because afterwards it might be too late.

Troubled by these feverish thoughts, he agonized for a long time over possible ways to safety and could not think of any. Then apathy set in again, a detachment that weakened his mind, a readiness to wait passively till nightfall.

"Blasted village!" How many times had he told himself that he was done because of it! He had been thoughtless enough to run into that Jerry who had raised a hue and cry, to be caught in a shoot-up, and to get a bullet in the chest. But there was surely something important there. The silence and secretiveness were undoubtedly artificially maintained by iron discipline impossible without the authority of a high command. And then those aerials again... By all appearances, a big HQ was stationed there, perhaps an army HQ. There wouldn't be a minor HQ deep in the rear. It would have been best to hit a HQ. But how? Aircraft were grounded, and if the weather improved, it would be difficult to find it, like that damned ammunition dump.

Well, he'd had bad luck at the beginning and even worse at the end. If it hadn't been for this wound, which had virtually finished him off, he would doubtless have thought of something. It would have been possible to lay an ambush and take a prisoner for questioning. But how could they take one now? He was the one more likely to be taken prisoner, but they wouldn't get much out of him. However, as long as he was alive and had the grenade, which was quite enough for the two of them and for this bath-house, the Germans would never get him. All hopes now were with the grenade.

But time passed, and no one found them in that cramped, dark shelter that reeked of smoke, on the outskirts of the village. Pivovarov was now spending more time standing at the wall, only occasionally commenting on what he managed to see through a

chink. Then he fell silent, there was evidently nothing special out there.

"Have you got a mother?" the lieutenant asked quietly.

This was a strange question under the circumstances and Pivovarov didn't understand it.

"Eh? What did you say?"

"Have you got a mother?"

"Of course."

"And father?"

"No, no father!"

"Is he dead?"

"Well..." Pivovarov hesitated. "I lived with my mother. If she only knew what we were going through here! She'd be scared stiff!"

"A good mother, is she?"

"Well," confirmed the soldier monosyllabically. "I'm the only son. So everything's for me."

"Where are you from?"

"Me? From near Pskov. A little town called Porkhov. Maybe you've heard of it. That's where we lived. Mum was a schoolteacher."

"She adored you, you say."

"And how! It was ridiculous. If I got up to any larks with the other kids—tragedy. If I didn't finish my breakfast—tragedy. And if I feel ill—whew! She got all the doctors up on their hind legs and fed me on medicines for a week. It was comical... But it's not comical now."

"No, it's not comical now," sighed the lieutenant.

"Mum's pure gold. I'm the only one she's got, but she's the only one I've got too. We haven't any relations there. Mum's from Leningrad herself. She lived in Petersburg before the Revolution. She's told me such a lot about Petersburg!.. And I've never even been there once. I kept meaning to go, but I never got round to it. Now, if only after the war."

"After the war, of course."

"I am not really bothered. If I get killed, what's the odds? Except that I'd be sorry for my mother."

Sorry for his mother, of course, he agreed silently, and, incidentally, Ivanovsky was sorry for his father too. Even one like his own father, veterinary surgeon Ivanovsky. Not very kind and not very clever; fond of gassing with the men and having a good few drinks on holidays, he often seemed profoundly unhappy, a failure who had taken some hard knocks from life. Indeed, all the other had wives concerned with meals, homes and family comforts and invariably adoring their officer husbands. He and his father, as far as Igor could remember, had always lived in little rooms, dens and

private flats, making do for dinner with a piece of bacon, a mess-tin of sauerkraut, tinned food and one aluminium spoon between the two of them. Igor could hardly remember his mother and almost never asked his father about her; he knew that he only had to mention the subject and his father could not hold back his tears. His mother's image was associated with a kind of family drama of the Ivanovskys, and the son did not even know whether she was alive or had died long ago. Incidentally, as he learned later, his father knew little more than Igor did himself.

People had said various things about Ivanovsky's father; his son's feelings about him were mixed, but even so he was his father, who loved his only son in his way, wanted nothing less than the best for him and was delighted that he had a career in the army. His hopes had been justified. Ivanovsky received the last letter from him at the military school before graduation, early in June. His father was near Belostok at the same Frontier Station; Igor was posted to the Army Personnel Department at Grodno, and thought that they would see each other soon. He did not even answer his father's letter; and then suddenly there was no address to which he could send a reply. Where was he, and was he alive? No one knew and there was no one to ask. It was evidently all up with his father; there was no hope of a meeting now...

Just as with his Janinka...

Strange as it might seem, but the parting with the girl cost him even more suffering than the separation from his father. True, afterwards, in battle, in the bloody turmoil of day-to-day life at the front, he often forgot about her, and only quite unexpectedly, somewhere at night in the hush before the agonizing uncertainty of the forthcoming battle, would he remember her so vividly that it stabbed him to the heart. He never told anyone about his first, short-lived and, probably, last love. He knew and felt that others were having things no easier. Who in wartime had not suffered, been numbed, known the anguish of separation from girl, wife, mother, or children?.. Separation wearied, burned and lacerated the heart, and no one could do anything to alleviate that pain.

...He must have lost consciousness again—gone to sleep or simply fallen quiet on the excruciating boundary between life and death. When he came to, the bath-house was almost completely plunged in darkness. He did not look at his clock any more, time for him had now lost its primary meaning, and his condition seemed to have deteriorated. His breathing was rapid and shallow, the shivers of the morning were now replaced by a sweaty fever. On waking, he ran his eyes round the place and saw Pivovarov seated on an overturned wooden bucket at the window and chewing a rusk. The window was beaded by his breath, and from time to time he wiped it clean with his mitten.

"What's out there?" asked the lieutenant, opening his eyes and closing them again.

"Same as before. They won't go away, the swine."

If they weren't going away, that meant there could be no thought of entering the village. But where could they go now, if not the village? It would be worse in the open than here in the bath-house; the frost would finish them off outside. But they could hardly expect any good to come of staying where they were.

They needed their skis, blast it; they shouldn't have left them in that first village. Although back there, under fire, there hadn't been time for the skis; what had mattered was to get away. But now, without skis, they couldn't even leave from the bath-house.

It didn't matter to him, of course, he personally didn't need skis any more. But they were absolutely vital to Pivovarov. Without skis, the boy would never make it to the front line, he'd be seized or shot by the Germans before he'd covered the first kilometre.

"What d'you think, Pivovarov—is it far to that village?"

"Which village?"

"Yesterday's."

"About two kilometres, maybe."

So it was as near as that; and last night he had been under the impression that they had come at least five kilometres away from it. Incidentally, the dimensions of distance and time had evidently lost their true meaning for him; every metre of the journey and every minute of life were unbelievably prolonged by his sufferings, distorting all normal human estimation of them. He would have to rely more on Pivovarov now.

"What's needed, Comrade Lieutenant?" he asked.

"The skis need fetching. At night. The Germans may not have picked them up."

Pivovarov was silent for a moment, weighing something up in his mind.

"Very well, I'll go," he answered with a sigh. "Let it get a bit darker, though. In about an hour."

"Yes, it has to be done, you know..."

"Of course. Only you... How will you manage here?.."

"I'll get by somehow. I'll wait."

It was not fully dark yet, but Pivovarov rose and, without further ado, began getting ready for the journey. First of all, he pulled off one boot and rewound the cloth round his foot. Then he took two rusks out of his pack, thrust them into his pocket, and moved the pack nearer to Ivanovsky.

"And this... I'll take the submachine gun—all right?"

"Yes, take it."

"With a submachine gun ... you feel sort of more confident!"

The lieutenant saw that Pivovarov could not contain his delight

on obtaining a weapon about which every soldier dreamed at the front. Those weapons were still new; the infantry were armed with rifles almost to a man. Ivanovsky himself had received his submachine gun only on the eve of departure. The general, in a good mood, had commanded his orderly to hand his submachine gun over to the lieutenant. Naturally in their predicament, a weapon could decide a great deal, if not everything; their wretched chances depended, as ever, on the eternal force of arms.

"Let the rifle stay here. It may come in handy."

The lieutenant did not object, and Pivovarov took both tarpaulin cases off the strap and, the magazines clinking inside, put them down on the floor near the bench.

"It's a good rifle. Spot on. The sergeant-major checked it."

As he listened absent-mindedly to Pivovarov, Ivanovsky was actually thinking that the rifle, several clips, the antitank grenade and two bottles of kerosene ought to be enough. If he was lucky, he would wait till Pivovarov came back with the skis and then they might undertake some new venture. If not, he would have to defend himself to the last.

Pivovarov rewound the other cloth round his foot, rightened his belt and, with obvious pleasure, slung the submachine gun over his shoulder. He looked ready to set off on a short but—who could tell?—by no means safe trip.

"What's the time by your clock? Five already? I'll be back in an hour; it's not far."

He would return in an hour and they would be together again. At this moment of new parting, Ivanovsky felt that it hadn't gone too badly with this quiet, uncomplaining lad and that it would be hard for him to get through that hour on his own. Separation would definitely reduce their strength. A strange, illogical logic had come into force according to which two divided by two made less than a unit, as, in other cases, two units added together made more than two. No doubt this did not conform with conventional logic and was only possible in war; but the lieutenant knew too well from his own experience that it was so.

Pivovarov was ready to leave, but for some reason he delayed, probably because there was a small item lacking in their farewell. Ivanovsky knew what it was and he hesitated. This was the last chance to look at that ill-fated village and try once more to find out something about the headquarters. Even if only a rough idea, so as not to return empty-handed to the general who had sent them out, and to compensate to some extent for the failure over the ammunition dump. He could not help also knowing, however, that the slightest incaution on Pivovarov's part could lead to a triple disaster, finally ruining their already slender chances of doing their duty and of returning to their own side.

"Well, I'm off, Comrade Lieutenant," said Pivovarov resolutely, turning to the door.

"Wait," said the lieutenant. "You know... I'm not insisting, it's up to you. But ... if you can manage it... What's in that village? It looks like a HQ..."

He was silent. Pivovarov waited tensely, but hearing no more, said simply: "Very well. I'll try."

Something in Ivanovsky's punctured chest screamed out in protest. What did he mean "I'll try"? No harm in trying; but this called for fiendish cunning, determination, stamina, and it still meant risking one's life. He could not explain this to the soldier; something prevented him from talking about things so terrible and yet far too commonplace in war; moreover, he could hardly master the pain inside him and his weakness. He merely sighed.

"Just take care!"

"All right. Don't worry. I'll go easy..."

"Yes. And not for long."

"Right you are. Here's some water for you." Pivovarov scooped some up out of the tub and put the tin by Ivanovsky's head. "If you get thirsty..."

Exhausted by this difficult conversation, Ivanovsky closed his eyes and listened as Pivovarov went into the changing-room, paused, then carefully opened the door and closed it firmly from outside. For another minute, Ivanovsky could hear his receding footsteps; they quickly died away, and with them, it seemed, died hope; something was irrevocably finished for them, but nothing new had begun. He began waiting, troubled, determined, listening to every whisper of the wind on the roof, every remote sound in the village; he was living in a disturbing and meagre world of sounds that were sometimes obliterated by his own coughing and the hoarse wheezing of his lungs.

Gradually, however, his hearing became dulled with fatigue, all was quiet around, and his mind was occupied by thoughts which branched out wondrously in time and space. It was as if he was beginning to doze, and then from among the half-delirious visions something like reality or his past came to the surface, disturbing and yet deliciously fatiguing...

Chapter Eleven

There were a few minutes left before the train departed and she stood weeping on the platform. No one was seeing her off and no one was meeting her. There were few people on the platform at that early hour in the morning, and Ivanovsky, going a step lower, jokingly called to the girl:

"Hey, beautiful, what are you crying for? We'll find you another one!"

It was inspired by youthful mischievousness, by the undemanding light-heartedness of travel in the relations between strangers who have met by chance and are parting never to meet again. The girl, however, wiped away a tear with the corner of her brightly coloured neckerchief and glanced at him enquiringly. Behind Ivanovsky, holding on to the handrail, hung Kolya Gomolko; both of them were in high spirits and ready to see the funny side of everything.

"Come with us! To Belostok!"

The girl automatically straightened the kerchief on her slender neck and ran her eyes once again over the faces of the two young men in their brand new military uniforms. A faint smile appeared on her lips.

"I'm going to Grodno."

"What a coincidence!" said Ivanovsky in mock surprise. "We're going to Grodno too. Let's travel together."

Without waiting to be persuaded, she picked up the suitcase at her feet and nimbly grasped the handrail of the train as it began to move off. Ivanovsky helped her up and, somewhat embarrassed but delighted by this turn of events, the new passenger climbed into the vestibule.

"Ticket, ticket, please!" demanded the elderly, fussy conductor who was hurrying to the exit with flags in his hand.

"She has a ticket! It's all right!" said Ivanovsky in a tone of voice that left no room for doubt as he squeezed his way into the carriage.

He led the girl to the fourth compartment where he and Gomolko were istalled, carrying her suitcase which seemed strangely light, almost empty.

"Here you are. You can have my place. I'll go up aloft," said Ivanovsky, offering her the lower bunk with joyful light-heartedness, and he put her suitcase on it. She obediently sat down by the window and eventually, after overcoming her shyness, said quietly:

"I haven't got a ticket."

"Why, couldn't you get one?"

"I've been robbed."

"How?"

"At night. In the train from Minsk."

That was not so good. They had taken on a responsibility that was beyond them, thereby infringing the strict regulations of the railway. It was no use backing out now, however. Igor, with a glance at Nikolai, read on his rough, invariably glum face the determination to stick to his own, and he himself also made up his mind.

"It's all right. We'll fix it with the conductor."

But they had to arrange it not only with the conductor, but with the other railway officials on the train, and the talks ended in Ivanovsky running to the booking-office, at the next big station, barely in time to get the last ticket for the place she had occupied. The ticket was to Grodno, and the girl soon felt better and even smiled, having finally got over her misadventure. Once she had recovered from her worries, she proved a sociable and altogether nice girl, soon telling them, not without humour, about her mishap on the journey. It transpired that she lived in Grodno and had been visiting her Minsk relatives whom she had never seen; then there had been that incident in the carriage. Everything had been taken out of her suitcase; moreover, she had been robbed of a coat, a cardigan and, of course, her money. Now she was saved and was very much obliged to both men for their kind-hearted sympathy and help.

"Oh, don't mention it!" said Ivanovsky self-deprecatingly and he changed the subject. "Have you lived in Grodno long?"

"I was born there."

"Ah, so you're a local?"

"Of course."

"And yet you speak Russian so well?"

"We always spoke Russian at home. Dad's Russian and my aunt, his sister, is Russian too. Only Mum's Polish."

"Where did you study?"

"In a Polish high school. There weren't any Russian schools there."

"And what's your name?" asked Igor, becoming more and more curious.

"Janinka. And yours, if it isn't a military secret?" she asked smiling saucily at him.

"Mine's Igor. This is Nikolai."

"I've got an uncle in Minsk; he's an Igor too. Igor Petrovich. Are you coming to serve with us?"

They exchanged glances at this point, since it was indeed rather close to a military secret—which, however, their travelling companion easily guessed. A week ago, after passing out from the military school, they had been posted to an army whose HQ was in her native Grodno.

"Sort of," replied Ivanovsky vaguely. "What's Grodno like—is it all right?"

"It's a lovely town. You won't regret it."

"You think they'll leave us in Grodno?" said the all-doubting Gomolko with his usual innate scepticism. "They'll hide us away in a forest garrison somewhere."

"Oh, but it's lovely in the forests. We have such marvellous ones!.."

Ivanovsky said nothing. His attitude to forests, even to the most splendid ones was hardly as rapturous as that of the girl. Back at the military school, in the months of summer camp, the forests, the fields, all that remoteness from the permanent places of habitation with their settled and organized life, had become such a bore by autumn that even the most gorgeous scenery became intolerable—he wanted to go to the city. It had rightly been said by someone that army people never notice nature; to them, the weather matters more.

Even so, there was such sincerity in Janinka's naive delight that Ivanovsky smiled, already prepared to agree to any forest near Grodno. He was feeling more and more attracted to this pleasant-looking girl in the bright printed cotton dress with the coquettish curls on her forehead. He already felt embarrassed about that flippant joke at Baranovichi Station; their cheek could only be excused by subsequent consideration for her.

The train was going further and further west, stopping briefly at small stations. Past the window glided the green fields of June, woods, magnificent pine-forests, villages and farms everywhere. Ivanovsky had never been in this part of Byelorussia before and he was now fired by a genuine interest in everything to do with this life that was so new to him.

At one small station, their carriage stopped directly opposite a tiny market. Ivanovsky jumped down on to the platform and hurriedly filled a newspaper with scrumptious peasant food—cucumbers, radishes, home-made sausage and even a panful of hot, floury, fragrant new potatoes. Then they all ate together, the two lads generously treating the girl who, laughing readily and joking, was now completely at ease in their company. After their meal, noticing something in Igor's manner, Nikolai got out of the way, climbing on to the top bunk for a sleep.

They were left sitting opposite each other, with only a little railway-carriage table between them.

He felt happy with her, although he still could not entirely quell a kind of embarrassment at his own intentions, although he had not had any intentions from the very beginning. By all appearances, she felt completely free and at ease with him. Almost without embarrassment, she took off her little white cork-soled shoes and, pulling her short dress down over her knees, settled herself more comfortably on the hard seat, looking impishly into his eyes all the time.

"But we have the Nyoman," she said pronouncing the word in the Byelorussian manner, and Ivanovsky smiled to himself, remembering his recent childhood, school and the famous poem by Yakub Kolas and this Byelorussian name of the river he had never seen. "There is a steep slope just outside our house, with two pus-

sy willows and rafts by the bank. I go swimming from the rafts down there. In the morning I go out early, there is still a light mist over the river, and the water is warm like fresh milk, and there's no one anywhere. I have such a lovely swim that I feel happy for the rest of the day."

"I prefer lakes. Especially forest lakes. They're wonderful in calm weather," said Ivanovsky.

"Honestly, rivers are better! The water smells boggy in lakes, but the river's always flowing and as pure as a tear. It's lovely on the river in summer. I'll show you when we arrive. You'll like it, believe me."

Of course, he was bound to like it. He was already sure that it was something special: a cottage, two willows on the cliff-top and the rafts at the bank from which you could dive into the deep, swift-flowing Niemen. And he painted it in his imagination, although he knew from experience that the richest imagination never corresponds to the reality. In reality, things are always different; better or worse, but different.

Janinka was at ease with him as if they had known each other a long time, and he continued to feel a kind of inexplicable constraint which not only would not go away but seemed to be getting worse. Igor was alarmed that by hailing her so unceremoniously in Baranovichi he had shown himself up as facetious and inclined to cheap travel flirtations, and that she could not have failed to realize this. It had not been facetiousness, though just boyish high spirits, perhaps not altogether seemly in the twenty-two-year-old graduate of a military school, only just appointed as platoon commander. Back there, on the platform, he had not looked at her properly; he had only seen her for the first time. He was looking at her now with wide-open, almost astonished eyes which, however much he tried, he could not take off her animated, radiantly happy face.

Towards the end of the day, as they approached Grodno, he already knew that he was not going to part with her; she was captivating him more and more with her girlish charm and attracting him with something baffling and mysterious for which he simply could not find a name but of which he was aware every single moment. They did not mention her travel mishaps, as if she had forgotten about them, and only once did she knit her brows with worry when moving her light little suitcase on the bunk.

"They even took my white paint. I was taking some to Papa. Now we won't be able to get any."

"What is he, a decorator?" asked Igor uncomprehendingly.

"An artist," replied Janinka simply. "And paints are hard to come by now. We used to get them sent from Warsaw..."

The train arrived at Grodno Station in the evening and, somewhat excited, they stepped down on to the platform. Swinging her

empty suitcase, Janinka led them to the Army HQ, which was on her way. Apart from the duty officer, however, there was no one there, which meant waiting till morning. They could spend the night there or in the garrison hotel. The lieutenants, however, decided not to look for the hotel and they put their suitcases into a kind of cubbyhole like a boxroom with three soldiers' beds by the walls. Gomolko promptly began making himself comfortable on one of the beds that stood in a niche, while Igor brushed the dust off his boots and hurried outside to where Janinka was waiting for him at the nearest corner under a chestnut-tree. She was delighted when he turned up, all the more so because he was free till morning, and so they set off along the town's evening street.

During the two hours that he had spent in HQ, Janinka had changed her clothes and she was now wearing a dark skirt and a bright silk blouse with a tiny lace collar. The high heels of her fashion shoes tapped firmly over the pavement. Dressed up, she seemed older and almost as high as his shoulder. They strolled down the evening street, and he liked the way many people knew her and greeted her, the men touching the brims of their hats with restrained dignity, and the women giving a polite nod of the head and friendly smiles. She replied with elaborate courtesy and a kind of elusive dignity, while she told him in an undertone something about the sights of that pretty street submerged in greenery.

"Here's our *Roskosz*; that's what it was called under Poland. Nothing special, but there's a church built in memory of the fallen in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. It's a bit low, true, but it's very neat inside. I was christened there. And look, you see those delightful little houses further on, a whole row of them, with fronts like crests. Those are the houses of the weavers from Lyons. Back in the seventeenth century, a rich man called Tisenhaus had weavers sent from Lyons and built exactly the same kind of houses for them as they had in France. And this is the cottage of the Polish writer Eliza Ozeszkowa; she lived and died here. She wrote interesting books, you know."

He really liked the town with the modest but lived-in cosiness of its cobbled streets with their narrow tiled pavements. Luxuriant green vines grew up the walls of many houses—some of them were covered up to the second floor with their clutching tendrils. But above all he was looking forward to seeing the Niemen that Janinka had praised so much and which, she said, flowed somewhere nearby, dividing the town into two unequal parts.

The street turned off near the Gothic hulk of the Catholic church and ran past the arcades and the town hall to emerge at a corner where there was an ice-cream woman with her cart under a chestnut-tree. Janinka, who was walking beside him all the time, lightly touched his elbow.

"Igor, may I ask you for something?"

"But of course," he said, ready to carry out her most impossible request.

"You know, I've always dreamed... Well, anyway, I've dreamed of ... of a young man treating me to an ice-cream."

"Oh, an ice-cream!.."

Igor almost had the horrors, thinking what a dumbell he was, never even realizing! He simply hadn't guessed what his goddess might have been wanting.

"Thank you, sir," said the ice-cream woman gratefully when he declined a few kopeks' change.

"Thank you, *Pani* Wanda," said courteously Janinka, taking an ice-cream cone from her.

At the end of a short street, there was the bright open space over the limes that can only occur in the vicinity of a very high hill, and they saw a stone bridge across a moat. This was the entrance to an ancient castle with its half-ruined walls, beyond which, at the back of an ancient park, towered a sumptuous palace enclosed by wrought-iron railings.

"That castle belonged to Batory, King of Poland," announced Janinka gravely, "and this is the New Castle. And now look over there. Can you see it?"

He looked over the stone parapet that was almost the height of a man, and gasped inwardly at the vertigious height on which they were standing. Far below, diminutive figures were moving over the stone steps of a staircase, dividing at the foot and going in opposite directions along the embankment that smoothly contoured that side of the Niemen and disappeared into the dense canopies of the enormous trees.

"Can you see? How d'you like it?" asked Janinka holding his elbow.

The ancient castle walls, breathing the mysteries of the past, the massive bridge over the stone stairs, the great clumps of green on the hills and slopes, the lofty stone column of the town fire tower dominating everything—of course, this was bound to interest him and he was ready to look at it all till evening. But from that height, the Niemen did not impress him at all; it was an ordinary river of average size confined between high banks. Janinka, however, was in raptures over it and chattered away at his side.

"Look, look, what a current! See the water over there? Look, under the willows, the whirlpools! Get in one of those and it'll spin you round and sweep you away—and you'll never get out again."

They retraced their steps a little way and went down to the embankment by the stone steps. Yes, the river was really beautiful, he had simply failed to appreciate if from so high up. Along

the right bank ran a well-designed, tree-planted embankment; on the right rose steep slopes criss-crossed by foot-paths and with the ruins of the fortress walls on top. The river curved smoothly out of sight behind a bend not far away that was filled with the enormous canopies of willow-trees. The town ended somewhere out there, with the blue of a coniferous forest into which a crimson sun was sinking. They walked slowly along the Niemen and Janinka talked and talked endlessly about something not very relevant at that blissful evening hour, and he thought how strangely everything worked out in life. Until that morning he had not even suspected the existence of such a girl, and now he knew that there would be no joy for him in life without her.

They walked along the Niemen for a long time, and when the sun had completely disappeared behind the jagged wall of the forest, they turned back towards the town. Listening to the tap-tap of her heels beside him, he vaguely felt that his life was being changed for him in a mysterious sort of way, was acquiring a still unknown but very important new meaning. He was glad, almost happy about this. The shining surface of the Niemen flowed past almost imperceptibly. The banks, thronged by daytime, had become noticeably empty by nightfall; anglers, tired at the end of the day, were packing up their fishing-rods and leaving for the town. The waves quietly splashed among the dark stones by the banks, and the fishing-boats, black and smelling of tar, rocked unsteadily. The enormous willows hanging over the embankment plunged it into the impenetrable darkness in which the passers-by were completely invisible. Somewhere from the houses came the sweetish smell of smoke; the town was making ready for the night and breathing the blissful tranquillity of its ancient traditions—independent, it seemed, of everyone and everything on this earth.

Janinka was drawing perceptibly closer to him, having doubtless prevailed over whatever it was that had kept them apart by day, and she was now walking along by his side, lightly touching his elbow with her fingers. The day's awkwardness had finally vanished, and so had the nerve-racking tension.

As soon as they stepped into the darkness under the willows, Janinka, with a bound that left him completely bewildered, ran up the grassy slope. He stopped uncertainly, thinking about his polished dress uniform boots, but she encouraged him from the darkness: "Come on, come on!" She quickly climbed through some prickly bushes still higher up the slope. He could not see what was on top; half the sky was blotted out by something like the spreading canopy of a tree, but he sensed the excitement of mystery in her voice and so he too climbed up into the bushes. Kicking off her shoes, Janinka climbed still higher, saying in a low voice out of the darkness: "You'll see something soon... Soon, soon..."

A minute later, after clambering up the steepest place and getting his hands scratched till they bled, he found himself on the edge of a narrow railed-in terrace; the hewn stones still exuded the heat accumulated during the day. Nearby, obscuring half the sky, stood a majestic old tree and there the sheer wall of a building loomed over them. It was quiet and dark all round; he could only just hear the gentle plashing of the Niemen below under the willows; there was a fragrance of lime from the walls and dill from the kitchen gardens not far away.

"Have you guessed? Have you guessed what this is?"

"I haven't guessed anything..."

"Our church–Kolozha... Twelfth century, have you guessed?"

"Yes. I'd like to see it..."

"You shall... There's lots of time yet. Come this way..."

She darted into the darkness again, slipped through the widely-spaced railings and climbed over the wall. Her white blouse vanished completely from his field of vision. Not wanting to be left behind, he climbed after her in the dark until he found himself on a small, grassy yard. The sky there was completely blotted out by the trees and it was dark except for the faint gleam of the wall nearby. Listening intently to the darkness, Janinka made her way barefoot to a low door in a niche, threw down her shoes, pulled the door open and whispered conspiratorially: "Go through!" He squeezed with difficulty through the narrow opening, and from inside held the door open for her to slip through in her turn. When he closed it, they were surrounded by pitch darkness; he could not see her at all any more and lightly held her shoulders so as not to lose her. In the watchful silence, something knocked and flapped above reverberatingly. Janinka started and then hastened to reassure him:

"Don't be scared–it's only pigeons."

"I'm not scared," whispered Igor in reply, although he found it simultaneously intriguing and uncanny.

"This is the iconostasis, this is the lectern, and here..."

Silently stepping in the darkness over the stone floor she led him to a wall, made him sit down with a movement of her hand and quietly called out: "O-o!"

"O-o! O-o! O-o!" replied many low voices in different places. He felt queasy.

"O-o-o!" she repeated a little more loudly.

"O-o-o! O-o-o!" The sound rolled away somewhere into the distance, soaring up under the invisible domes of the chapels to vanish somewhere above, probably in the bell-tower.

"Resonators. D'you understand?"

"What resonators?"

"You don't know? Oh, really!.. Come over here... This way, this way..."

Again she led him by the hand into the darkness as a sighted person leads a blind man, stopped somewhere and lightly prodded him in the side.

"Go on, feel. You're tall, you'll probably be able to reach them."

He began feeling the rough wall and soon came to some smoothly polished cavities in it, but he could not make sense of them, although he did not ask and was not surprised. He had already become used during the day to such a wealth of puzzles and impressions that he needed time to sort them out for himself.

But time was running out, the shortest night in the year was hastening to greet the morning, and when they came out of the church, the stars were already fading over the town and the distant glow of the sun was glimmering on the eastern rim of the sky. Hurrying on and not giving Igor time to think, Janinka chattered and chattered away, bubbling over with eagerness to share with him all the significant and interesting things she had ever seen and known. Picking up her shoes, she was already going through the prickly briars on the slope, and he only just managed to keep up with her, no longer worried about his boots, which were probably in a bad way.

"Come here, come here! Why are you so clumsy? Don't be scared, you won't fall. I'll hold you up..."

After crossing a gully, they came out again on to the embankment of the now very drowsy, somewhat steamy river, and Janinka ran down even lower over the bare stones to the water.

"Come here. I'll show you my flower garden while father's asleep. The violets are in bloom already. They smell marvellous at dawn!"

Slithering on his leather soles, he descended the stony slope to a boat in which she was already busy pushing it nearer to the bank with an oar. He jumped in and had no sooner seized the side than Janinka swung it downstream.

"It'll be nearer this way. It takes quite a time to go over the bridge..."

"You really are some girl!" he exclaimed delightedly.

"A bad one, yes? Is that what you think? A bad one?"

"Charming!"

"Charming, indeed! If Dad wakes up, he'll give charming what for!"

The strong current in the middle carried the boat downstream, but she managed to row to the bank with a single oar and they soon glided up to a fence under the massive willows.

"Grab hold, or we'll be carried away!"

He managed to clutch a slippery, half-rotten stump in the water. She jumped ashore and they pulled the boat up on to the grass.

"They'll find it in the morning. And now... Up this lane, then

along the garden, across the potatoes patch, and our house is on the bank, just under the church. You're not very tired, are you?" she suddenly asked with concern, looking into his eyes.

"No, I'm fine..."

They set off along a lane on the outskirts of the town overgrown with grass. She was carrying one shoe in each hand, her shoulder touching him lightly as he walked along, and he sensed the warmth of her body through the thin material of her blouse, her breathing and the mysterious, disturbing fragrance of her hair. He thought how extraordinary lucky he had been that day. He was already feeling grateful to his ill manners that had allowed him to make that weak joke in Baranovichi, grateful to this city and its ancient monuments, and to this night, so unlike all the other nights he had known.

"Janinka," he called softly drawing closer to her from behind, but she only quickened her pace.

"Janinka..."

"Now we go round this house, then we turn off on to the path, cross the garden and..."

"Janinka..."

"Come on, come on, hurry! Or Dad'll get up, and if he finds out I'm not in..."

They went along a patch overgrown with dewy burdocks alongside a fence and began walking more quickly. Dawn was breaking. Nearby, her side of the Niemen was still slumbering in the fragrant darkness of the gardens. The well-worn path brought them to the edge of a potato field starred all over with little white blossoms; there was a strong fragrance of young potato plants and fresh earth. Janinka quickly went on ahead and, his boots catching in the stalks, he had difficulty in keeping up with her. The spires of the church were already quite near against the brightening back-cloth of the sky and beyond them somewhere the rafts were quietly splashing in the warm river water. They had about another hundred paces to go when the nocturnal silence of the still sleeping town was violated by a strange, alien, at first quiet but rapidly growing sound. Janinka stopped in front of him.

"What's that? What's that droning? Is it planes?"

Yes, it was aircraft approaching, but he still did not yet believe that there could be such an untimely beginning to the terrible thing that had been oppressing everybody with ghastly forebodings during the last few weeks. Clutching at a weak hope, he quelled the fear inside him, passionately wanting that dreadful thing not to happen, to go away...

As if seeking protection, the frightened Janinka darted up towards him and he had only just put his arms round her when a series of violent explosions close by hurled them on to the hard

potato plants. Stiff, hot waves struck them from behind, bespattering their backs with soil...

When the first deafening boom was over, he stood up, and Janinka jumped up beside him with her hair loose on her shoulders, her blouse soiled, trying for some reason to put a shoe on her dirty foot. Deafened by the explosions, he did not immediately hear her strangely weak voice.

"Run to the bridge. To the bridge, quick! There's a bridge behind the church..."

Of course, he had to get to the bridge, to HQ. He already knew what had happened and he had no alternative but to get there at the double.

Without looking round again, reeling under the shock of the explosions, falling down and jumping up again, he raced to the bridge, taking with him in his feverish brain the fleeting glimpse of a girl with a shoe in her hand, left standing amid dewy, flowering potato stalks.

Chapter Twelve

He was snatched out of oblivion by the sound of shots. At first he took them for stray ones in the village nearby, but, when he listened more intently, he realized that they were coming from the opposite direction, the village from which they had escaped during the night and to which Pivovarov had gone. Sick with a horrible sense of foreboding, Ivanovsky held his breath and listened hard; there were no two ways about it—the shots were coming from the first village.

He had probably missed the very first shots: he had only come round to the sharp crack of a rifle and a submachine gun rattling lengthily in the silence. Of course, it was his own submachine gun—the German ones sounded different and he was well aware of the difference. Ivanovsky leaned on his elbow, but he had a crushing sensation in the chest; he caught his breath at the pain, coughed, spat out thick gobs of blood, and again fell back weakly on to the bench. While he was coughing, silence fell outside and no matter how hard he listened after that, he could not hear anything any more.

Hardly able to master his agitation, the lieutenant felt for the clock near the bench. It was twenty to eight, which meant that Pivovarov had been away about two and a half hours. If it was only a kilometre to the village, or even two, then he should have been back by now. If not, it meant... It meant that he had made his way there but had not been able to escape unnoticed and had met with the same fate as Ivanovsky the day before.

The lieutenant half sat up again, listened, tried to peer through the window scarce glimmering in the black wall, but was unable to reach it and sat down on the bench. He was feeling worse, and there were fiery red rings swimming about before his eyes. With one hand he felt his rifle, now amazingly heavy. He did not need it, however, nobody was troubling him in the bath-house for the time being and there was no one in the vicinity. He could hardly do anything to make things easier for Pivovarov, who had clearly run into trouble in the village, but he could not lie passive either. With a tremendous effort, clutching at the wall, he went into the changing-room and kicked the door open with his foot.

It was like all the nights in the November of that year, cold and windy, with a low, starless sky and the space between earth and cloud dull and plunged in gloom. The snow on the ground was fresh and clean. Pivovarov's deep footprints were clearly visible; they ran along the wall of the bath-house and round the corner.

Gasping as the wind buffeted him, Ivanovsky waited a moment and listened to the deep silence of the night, but nothing was to be heard any more—neither shots, nor footsteps, nor shouts. Without closing the door, he lowered himself down on the threshold, leaning against the timbers, and sat there for an hour or perhaps more. He was in a state of troubled, morbidly tense expectation, well aware that if Pivovarov did not turn up in the next few minutes, he would never show up at all. But he did not appear in the next few minutes, nor in the next few hours. When he was unable to wait any longer, Ivanovsky did not stand up but crawled on his hands and knees to his clock inside the doorway; it was ten to ten.

"Why did I send him out? Why did I send him?" thought the lieutenant repentantly. "Did those damned skis matter all that much? Or the HQ? I've sent him to his death and mine too. I've ruined everything."

He could not, of course, do anything now without Pivovarov; but if he himself was doomed, then he should at least have thought of saving the other man. He had sent him on a mission with one chance of success in a thousand. The Germans could have laid an ambush or put hidden outposts in the field, they would certainly have strengthened their guard—it wouldn't have been easy to get through them. If he had failed to do so the previous night, when the HQ staff were not yet alerted, then there was even less chance of success now.

"So what am I to do now? What?" wondered Ivanovsky for the thousandth time, sitting hunched near the bath-house door.

However, he already knew what; he was simply hoping against hope that Pivovarov might come, but when the futility of hoping had become absolutely obvious to him, the lieutenant leaned against the walls and lifted himself to his feet.

He was testing himself to find out what he was capable of or, perhaps, to see if he was incapable of anything. He could still stay on his legs, especially if he had additional support under his hands. At present, the walls were providing that support, but in the field he could lean on his rifle butt. His feet more or less obeyed him, but it was worse with his breathing and his head. He thought that his head might clear in the wind outside and he would somehow cope with his breathing. If he expended his strength sparingly, with frequent rests...

Completely obsessed with his plan, the lieutenant went back into the bath-house and thrust the clips from the pouches into his pockets. He could not lift the pack on to his shoulders and left it on the bench, but he took the grenade with him. He could not stay there another minute and, clutching the door, went outside.

Unsteadily, all but falling, but with a stubborn and almost inexplicable determination, he covered twenty paces in Pivovarov's distinct footprints and only then did he stop. The rifle proved much heavier than he had expected, but he leaned on it whenever he was about to fall, and especially during his rest periods. He could not have kept himself on his legs, which were trembling with weakness. When he recovered his breath, he looked back with a strange, hunted stare. There, forlornly dark, stood the bath-house where they had waited in safety for twenty-four hours and to which, by the look of things, he was never going to return.

On his second try, he barely managed fifteen paces and, swaying, was stopped by a fit of coughing. The coughing was the worst part; with its deep, gut-wrenching pain, it racked him all over until everything went dark in front of his eyes. But Pivovarov had bandaged him well, the dried scab on the wound, though it hurt him, prevented the dressing from slipping down, and the wound was no longer bleeding. If only it weren't for that intolerable pain inside.

He wanted to go as quickly as possible, and now his progress marker was the bath-house. Scarcely able to stay on his feet, he had already stopped four or five times, looking round each time; but the bath-house, as if on purpose, was still a grey shape in the murk, receding with great reluctance into the night. At least an hour must have passed before the grey darkness finally swallowed it up.

There was snow round him, wind and the open field. Ivanovsky knew that he had reached the mid-point of his journey; he couldn't go back now, he simply hadn't the strength for it. He was not looking back any more; there could not be anything behind him—anything good or bad lay ahead.

He then fell two times in succession and did not get up again immediately, lying on the snow and waiting for the pain in his disturbed wound to go. Another time, he had real bad luck; he fell

badly, on his back, and the shock of the pain was so violent that he lost consciousness briefly. Then he came to, but lay on the snow for a long time, conscious of the round grenade underneath him. However, he summoned up the strength to sit up and then to struggle shakily to his feet and take the few first and most difficult steps.

He tried not to think of anything; he did not even look round much, never taking his eyes off the snow marked by Pivovarov's deep footprints. They kept going in the same direction as if the soldier had quite clearly remembered their journey from yesterday's village and had been heading rapidly for it. Ivanovsky's main worry was not to lose that trail.

It would be very easy to do so, especially when he succumbed to the latest wave of weakness and everything went dark in front of his eyes. Then he would stop digging the rifle into the snow and wait until the spell had passed. Moreover, he was being violently buffeted by the wind; it would not let him look into the distance and wrung the tears from his eyes. Sometimes the more violent gusts pushed Ivanovsky so hard that he would stagger and all but topple over. But he stubbornly fought the wind, his own weakness and his pain. He understood, of course, that he was unlikely to meet Pivovarov; he was more likely never to see him again, but he must still go along the fatal path on which he had sent him. He had risked too many men in this war, too many men had met their deaths because of him. But the risk he was taking now was different from the others; it was the last and therefore he must go through with it to the bitter end. If he had not spared many in this diabolical game with death, he had at least not spared himself either, and this alone justified his right as a commander to dispose of others. He did not want to recognize any other right in war. If the worst came to the worst, he must convince himself before dying that Pivovarov was not bleeding to death somewhere in this snowy field.

He went on and on, shakily, weakly, stopping now and again and leaning on Pivovarov's long and heavy rifle. Once, when his knees gave way out of exhaustion, he sat down on the snow and had a good rest. But getting to his feet again cost him such an agonizing effort that he did not risk sitting down any more and he rested by leaning on the rifle. He was now stopping every four or five paces. He could not breathe properly any more.

It again seemed to him that he had covered about three kilometres, if not more, and he doubted if Pivovarov had been right about the distance to the village. It was hard to believe that it was about two kilometres from their bath-house. A pity he hadn't brought his clock with him and couldn't check the time. From certain elusive signs, however, it seemed to him that the village was

already not far away and he was on the outskirts. Pivovarov's trail, however, stretched on and on, as if it was never going to end. It was hard to guess where he might be now, although Ivanovsky was bracing himself for the worst. But it could be that, as yesterday, he had shaken off his pursuers and was wounded and hid somewhere in the field.

Ivanovsky could have missed him since there was nothing visible ahead. Suddenly, however, to one side, in the vague darkness of night amid the snow-covered weeds, his attention was caught by a distinct movement. At first he did not even glance that way and simply ran his eye over the snow; but then he stopped and peered, and his heart missed a beat. Quietly, almost soundlessly, something like a piece of paper was fluttering in the wind, although there was no knowing how a piece of paper could have got there. He left Pivovarov's trail and, unable to take his eyes off the fringe of weeds, he trudged over there, his feet weaving about in the deep snow.

Some distance away he suddenly made out a white indistinct hump in the weeds, the typical shape of a body lying on the ground, the black tops of the boots covered in snow. He stopped. A strange bewilderment flashed across his mind. Who could be lying there, in the field at night, in such cold? For some reason, the lieutenant could not bring himself to admit that this could be Pivovarov, no doubt it would be too incongruous to see his man in that position; it must be someone else, a chance soldier, a passing stranger.

Nevertheless, it was indeed his last man, Pivovarov. He was lying motionless in a torn camouflage suit, hatless, his close-cropped head sprinkled with snow, his legs apart. The lieutenant did not immediately notice that the snow around had been trampled by many feet and there were many black submachine-gun cartridges lying about.

Lurching up to the weeds, Ivanovsky dropped the rifle and fell down next to the soldier. With frozen fingers he seized his head and lifted it up, but, sprinkled with snow, it had long ago lost all signs of life and was simply the head of someone bereft of the slightest resemblance to Pivovarov. Ivanovsky began feeling over his body; the torn camouflage suit was frozen stiff with blood, the jerkin was also frozen to his blood-stained body. He had probably been killed by a burst at close range. The snow under his body and near it was also frozen into hard, grey mounds.

"What have they done to you? What have they done?" the bewildered question died on his lips. It was only too clear what they had done. They had caught up with Pivovarov and shot him at pointblank range. They might also have shot him while he was lying wounded in the snow among the weeds; and now white tufts

of wadding were sticking out of the many holes in his jerkin. His trouser pockets had been turned out, his tunic unbuttoned and his thin, blood-stained chest was covered with snow. There was no submachine gun to be seen anywhere; it had doubtless been taken by the Germans.

Realizing that it was all over and there was no need to go any further, Ivanovsky slumped and sat in silence, his hands resting limply on the snow. Beside him lay the soldier's lifeless body. The lieutenant was overwhelmed by unusual sense of desolation. He hadn't a single desire or thought in his head. Only somewhere, in the very depths of his being, a forgotten ember of rage, almost of fury, was smouldering away. This ember, however, burned more and more fiercely as the time passed. But it was not yet directed against anyone in particular, it was rather his human chagrin burning out at this hopeless ending. Ivanovsky was now thoroughly aware that he was not going to survive, was not going to be saved, was not going to get through to his side, was going to die on this very field, between two strange villages, and that no one now would report to the command either about their death or about this German HQ. Needless to say, no one could take action against the HQ, because our people were far away, and the dead had no chance of doing anything whatever. He had no alternative but to sit here and wait until the cold and his wound extinguished the last spark of his life. There was even something alluring in the idea, since it would free him from the enervating confrontation with the enemy, from his pain, and from himself. To put an end to it all as soon as possible, there would be some point in pulling out the pin of the antitank grenade and releasing the lever... The powerful explosion would blow their bodies to pieces, would disperse the snow all round and would dig a small crater in the ground which would also be their grave. If his end should take too long or if he should be unable to bear it any more, that was what would have to be done. There was no alternative. And may his homeland and his people forgive him; it wasn't his fault that his luck had not been of the best and he had not been spared by that most terrible thing in war, after which nothing exists any longer.

He would probably not have lasted long in the freezing wind and would have stayed there forever beside his comrade, if strange sounds had not come to him out of the windy silence. His hearing was evidently the hardiest of his senses and was alert on the very brink of death. It was his hearing that now kept him in contact with the outside world. At first, Ivanovsky thought that he was imagining things, but, on listening harder, he banished all doubts on that score; an engine was snarling somewhere. He remembered how they had come upon the road leading into a village the previous night in the field, but he had no idea where that road

could be now. Even so, it was somewhere, a vehicle was driving along it quite near in the grey nocturnal darkness. Holding up his head, the lieutenant listened long and intently to the strained din of the engine until the noise faded into the distance.

This unexpected event disturbed his now almost calm state of mind; a new desire, contradictory to his feelings, had stirred in his soul. He stopped thinking about his misfortune and went on the alert; wrathful despair focussed on an aim, his last aim in life. O, if this had only happened earlier, when he still had a little strength left!..

Afraid of being too late, he stirred on the snow, drew up his wounded leg and somehow propped himself up on his hands. First he rose to his knees, then he tried to stand up. But he could not keep his balance and fell with one shoulder digging into the snow. He uttered a muffled, prolonged groan at the pain in his chest. He lay there for about ten minutes, clenching his teeth and afraid to breathe more deeply. Then he began getting to his feet again. His third attempt succeeded; he finally heaved himself up on to his trembling legs, reeled slightly but did not fall. He forgot to take the rifle lying just a short way off at Pivovarov's feet, but he was no longer sure that if he stooped for it he might not fall again. After a moment's reflection, he did not risk bending over in case he fell, and quickly, as if attempting to gather speed, he set off over the snow.

He was trying with all his might to keep his balance and stay on his feet, but he was hampered all the time by the strong wind. It seemed to be rising, and at times it hit him so hard in the chest that it was impossible to keep standing. He fell down again about thirty paces away from Pivovarov and promptly tried to get up again, but failed. Fighting the violent pain in his right side, he lay for a while persuading himself not to hurry, to bide his time, to expend his feeble strength more economically. But he was so obsessed with the urge to get to the road as quickly as possible that his reason was already a bad guide—he was now driven by a feeling that was becoming stronger than any rational arguments.

Again he got up, first on all fours, then on to his knees, then with a weak spurt and enormous effort on to both feet. The most difficult part was to stay upright just before taking the first step; after that his body acquired momentum and the first few steps came comparatively easily. The next few steps were slower again; he veered to one side, then to the other, and finally he fell down, reaching his cold-benumbed hands out in front of him.

These enforced stops after falling were lasting longer and longer; sometimes it seemed that he would never get up again, his sense of continuity was disrupted at times as consciousness slipped away and he would suddenly come to himself in bewilderment.

Where was he? But he definitely knew where he had to go; not once did he lose his bearings, and in his semi-conscious state he clearly remembered his last aim in life.

But once, when he fell, he realized that he would not be able to get up again. Too much of his rapidly diminishing energy was being used on getting up. He lay on the searingly cold snow for a long time. Too long for him to ever get up again. At the very last moment, however, he suddenly knew that he was freezing to death, and this frightened him; he could not allow that to happen. He simply began crawling along, ploughing through the soft, fluffy snow with his elbows and knees.

Soon, however, he found that crawling was no easier and perhaps even more difficult than weaving about on his legs—he kept running out of breath and falling on his face. It was an endless blind struggle with the snow, but it had one advantage over walking: he didn't have to struggle to his feet, and this saved what was left of his almost completely drained strength. He ploughed on, stopping still on the snow and ploughing on again as long as he had air in his lungs. His entire progress consisted of this frenzied ploughing through the snow and long intervals of semi-oblivion. He did not lose consciousness for long, however; it was sustained by the goal of his last moments and compulsively dictated its own will to his exhausted body.

His chest was torn with coughing, but he could not breathe in deeply or cough to clear his lungs—he feared a bout of pain which he might not be able to withstand. Even so, the coughing once shook him so violently that he choked for breath and his head fell into the snow. When he had more or less cleared his lungs, he felt a warm, salty taste on his lips. He spat, distinctly saw blood on the snow, wiped his lips with the frozen sleeve of his camouflage blouse and spat again, but it was still bloody. A dark, slow trickle was running from his chin on to the snow, and he lay completely helpless on his side, feeling in desperation that life was gradually leaving his body. However, after lying like that for a while, he again took fright at the approach of the inevitable, although he knew that it had to happen sooner or later. He was now mainly concerned with one single question. Where was the road? He had to get to it before death overtook him. His whole struggle on that field was, in essence, a contest with death. Who was going to overtake whom? It looked as though death had caught up with him and was following on his heels, waiting for the moment to strike him down once and for all.

But no! To hell with it, the blood—it wouldn't all run out. He felt that something was still left in him—if not strength, then at least determination. He lay there for half an hour, chewing and swallowing snow to stop the blood, and he succeeded. His jaw was

numb with cold, but his lips had lost the salty taste and slowly, with pauses, he crawled on, dragging the grenade along on his belt. When the silver-grey outlines of birch-trees appeared out of the snowy semi-darkness in front of him, he realized that this was the road and that he had reached it at least. The tremendous tension of the whole night vanished, his eyes went dim, he lay down with his punctured chest on the freezing snow in the furrow he had ploughed and did not move. He had lost consciousness.

Chapter Thirteen

He came round nevertheless, completely numbed by the cold, and immediately remembered where he was and what he had to do. His last goal in life was still before him, even when he lost consciousness, but he did not know how much time passed in oblivion and what he was still capable of doing. He even panicked in the first moments, believing that he was too late; the road was quiet and there was not a sound to be heard anywhere. The snow swept over the field, the wind was raising a white powder from the ground and the lieutenant was covered in snow up to the shoulders. His hands were so numb that he could not move his fingers, but he remembered that he must crawl on to the road; only there could he consider his journey over.

The exhausting battle with the snow began all over again. Ivanovsky crawled slowly, covering about a metre a minute, no more. He was now so weak that he could not raise himself on to his elbows, and he pushed along crabwise over the snow, forcing himself along with his legs. For some reason he could not feel any pain in his wounded leg; perhaps the pain had worked itself out. His chest, however, was still burning; it had become a focus of mounting and unceasing pain. He was very much afraid that the blood might come to his throat again; if that happened, it would be all over with him, he felt, and he was careful to breathe more deeply and not to cough. He nursed his punctured lungs as something on which the last hours of his life were totally dependent.

His consciousness, like a tight-rope walker on a wire, was balancing all the time between reality and oblivion, ready at any moment to plunge into eternity, and by an enormous effort of will the lieutenant somehow prevailed over the weakness that engulfed him. He simply could not allow himself to lose consciousness when the road was just in front of him.

He would nevertheless have got a grip on himself somehow and slowly, with difficulty, would have crawled on to the road, had it not been for a ditch that barred his path like a fiendish trap. Ivanovsky all but choked when he fell into its snow-filled depths and

began coughing. He immediately felt the blood coming up again; a thick, nauseating gob slipped out of his mouth and a warm stream of blood ran from his chin down his neck on to the snow. He lay prone in the ditch and thought that he could not have imagined anything more stupid for himself. To crawl with such difficulty all night, completely exhausted, to a road, just to die two paces away from it. Tomorrow the Germans would be driving along it, and instead of greeting them with a grenade in his hands, he would present himself to them as a wretched, frozen corpse. That was fate!

His consciousness began to slip away from him again, and this time no effort could help him. His eyes were clouded, the whole world shrank to a tiny, bright, rapidly receding point which went out. Nevertheless, even this time, something in him prevailed over death and brought his tortured body back to life. Without any effort of will on his part, the point lit up again, and he suddenly felt the snow around him once more, cold, and himself in it, desperately weak and in pain. He stirred at once, started moving, trying at all costs to pull himself out of the snow trap of the ditch and crawl on to the road. While he was still alive, he had to make his last stand and end his life there.

In spite of everything, he got out of the ditch, crawled along another four paces and lay still, exhausted. There was a rut underneath him—he could feel it with his body; it would not be possible to drive round him. He gasped briefly, with satisfaction and began preparing the grenade.

The grenade, however, cost him even more torment than the ditch. His frozen, disobedient fingers had completely lost all feeling. For several minutes, he tried to untie the cord with which the grenade was attached to his belt, but he simply could not manage it. He fumbled blindly over his hip, but he just could not feel the ends of the cord, and this was frightful. He nearly wept at this sudden, devastating treachery, but his hands were indeed refusing to obey him. Then, with his elbow, he felt the round bulk of the grenade and, mustering such strength as he had left, he pressed on the grenade from above down towards the groin. He heard something snap and he at once knew that he had relieved himself of a weight; the grenade was lying under him on the snow.

But he had clearly used up too much strength and was incapable of doing anything else. He lay for a long time in the rut, with the powdery snow sweeping over him. But let him be covered with it now, he was in no hurry, he had reached his goal—all he had to do was prepare the grenade. With hands that had lost all feeling, he nevertheless found its iron handle, but he could not straighten the ends of the pin. He somehow manoeuvred the grenade along the rut to his chin and gripped the parted ends of the pin with his teeth.

At any other time, he would have only needed a quick movement of two fingers to straighten the pin ends and they could have been tugged out of the handle. This time, however, no matter how hard he struggled, he could not do anything with them. They seemed to be stuck there, as if soldered stiff. Breaking his teeth and tearing his gums, he spent half an hour gnawing, twisting, bending the intractable wire. It must have taken him a hundred attempts before he managed to grip both ends with his teeth and press them together. All this time, he was very much afraid that he would be too late, that lorries would appear on the road and he would not be able to do anything to them. But no lorries turned up and, when the grenade was ready to throw, he began to wait patiently and insistently.

Waiting, however, proved to be the hardest thing that he had been through during the night. With his sensitive, sharpened hearing, he listened for every sound in the field, but there were no other noises around him apart from the ceaseless booming of the wind. The road, which had spurred him on to all superhuman efforts and which he had been so desperate to reach, was empty. Everything around was quiet and had gone to sleep; only the fine snow rustled monotonously on the frozen material of the camouflage suit, slowly covering him as he lay in the rut.

Listening intently all the time and hearing absolutely nothing, Ivanovsky dismally began to think that, by all appearances, nothing was going to show up until morning. It was not the kind of road that was much used at night, but someone would surely appear in the morning. Someone was bound to drive in or out of that HQ; a HQ could not exist without a road. But he had no idea how much time was left till morning, one hour or maybe five. He now very much regretted that he had left the clock in the bath-house; that had been truly thoughtless of him; not knowing the time, he simply could not work out how to save his strength till morning.

Gripping the handle of the grenade with numb fingers, he lay prone on the snow and waited. He hardly opened his eyes at all; there would have been no point in doing so, for he knew that there was a dull, snowy darkness around him and nothing else. In the watchful silence of the night, he could clearly hear every sound in the world, but the noises that he was so eager to hear were not distinguishable anywhere.

Since he was not moving, he quickly began to lose warmth and grow numb, fully aware that the cold and the wind would finish him off much sooner than the Germans. He felt this more and more strongly with every cell of his body, which was frozen stiff and could not even shiver any more. He was steadily and inevitably freezing to death. There was no one to help him, or encourage him, or even to know how he had met his end. At the thought of

this, Ivanovsky suddenly felt terrified. He had never been so alone; always at difficult times there had been someone beside him, there had always been someone to rely on, someone with whom to share the worst. But here he was alone, like a hunted, wounded wolf in the boundless, freezing field.

Of course, he was doomed; he understood this with sufficient clarity for one in his position and he did not particularly regret it. Nothing could save him; he was not hoping for a miracle, he knew that for someone with punctured lungs there were no miracles in war. He was not hoping for anything, he merely did not want to die in vain. He must not freeze to death on this road, he must wait till dawn and the first lorry carrying Germans. It would be good if it could be a general. Ivanovsky would send him sky-high along with his posh car. At the worst, it would be a colonel or an important SS officer. In all likelihood, the HQ in the village was a big one and there were plenty of high-ranking officers about.

But for this he had to hold out till dawn, survive the diabolical cold of that fatal night. Living through it was proving so difficult that he began to feel afraid. He was afraid of freezing to the road; he was afraid of falling asleep or losing consciousness for a long time; he was afraid of the pain in his chest that went with every movement, he was afraid of coughing any harder in case the blood began to flow. He was beset on this accursed road by a multitude of dangers that he must vanquish or avoid, or outwit, if he was to last out till morning.

He could hardly feel his hands any more, but his legs were now beginning to go numb too. He tried moving his toes in his boots, but it was no use. Then, to retain what little warmth was left in his body, he began kicking the road with his frozen boots. In the silence of the night he heard a hollow, alarming banging behind him and he stopped. He had not warmed his legs in the least, but he felt bad and, aware that he was losing consciousness, he pushed the grenade underneath him with a last effort. He must now cherish it more than his life. Without it, his whole existence on this road would immediately lose its meaning.

After a deep gap in consciousness, followed by a long interval of sticky, enervating weakness, he felt the piercing cold again and was horrified. This night was apparently never going to end and none of his ingenuities would help him to survive till morning. But how could it be so? He all but screamed aloud in protest and despair. Was nothing going to come of it after all? Where had all his efforts taken him? Had they really all been in vain? They were the product of his material ego and were themselves material, after all: they were his weakened flesh and the blood he had lost. Why must they vanish without a trace in this strictly material world? Become nothing at all?

None the less, he knew almost for certain that all would end in failure, but he refused to admit it. He wanted to believe that all accomplished by him in such anguish should be discovered somewhere, should make itself felt in something. Even if not today, now, on this road—perhaps somewhere else after a time. Should his agonizing death, like that of thousands of other no less agonizing deaths, not lead to some kind of result in this war? Otherwise how could he perish in the total hopelessness about his own necessity on this earth and in this war? He had been born for some reason, had lived, struggled, suffered, had shed his hot blood and was now yielding up his life in agony. There must be some kind of human meaning in this, even if not a very important one.

And he suddenly believed that it would come to pass. It would inevitably come to pass that no human torments would be meaningless in this world, the less so the soldiers' torments and the soldiers' blood, spilled on this inhospitable, frozen land, that was nevertheless his own. There was meaning in that! And there would be a result, it could not be otherwise.

He need only wait till morning...

Meanwhile the frost and the cold were getting at his innards, and he could feel it. With the edge of his fading consciousness, he sensed the cold slowly but remorselessly getting the better of his drained body, and he was counting the few minutes left to him. Once, half opening his eyes, he was suddenly astonished at what he saw and he opened them wider with an effort. It was getting light over the field. The darkness which seemed to have covered the earth for a whole eternity with a dense pall, had noticeably risen above it, the field was more spacious, the sky had cleared and he could distinctly see the hoary crowns of silver birches. The road, swept over by the powdery snow dust, receded into the far distance.

After taking all this in with a short but tiring stare, he wanted to let his head fall on to the snow, but he suddenly saw something. At first he thought it was a lorry but, on looking more intently, he realized that it was a cart. Exhausted by long peering, he let his head fall on to the snow with mixed feelings of bewilderment, terror and hope. He was faced with an enormous and fateful question: who could be riding in a cart? If it were collective farmers, it would be the kind of miracle in which he had long ceased to believe; rescue was on the way. But if it were Germans... No, he decidedly couldn't understand why, at that hour of the morning, Germans should be coming in a cart from the village in which a big HQ was situated. Everything in him rebelled against such a foolish idea; he had been waiting all night for anything that might come along, but certainly not a loaded cart, in which he was not interested.

Even so, it was indeed a cart and it was approaching slowly. He

could already see the animals. A pair of big chestnut dray-horses which, their short tails swinging, were lightly and without visible effort drawing a cart piled high with straw. On the very top, holding the reins and quietly chatting, sat two Germans.

Ivanovsky lay dead still in the rut, completely crushed by what he had seen. He could not possibly have foreseen such bad luck. After great efforts, suffering and loss of human lives, instead of an ammunition dump, instead of a general in a swanky car, or even a staff colonel with a briefcase, he was going to have to blow up two carters with a load of straw.

But there obviously wasn't going to be anything else. He was making his last contribution for the homeland in the name of a soldier's duty. Other, bigger contributions would fall to others. There would be, no doubt, enormous ammunition dumps, hyperarrogant Prussian generals and vicious storm troopers. But he had drawn carters. He was to engage them in his last battle, with the outcome foreordained. But he must engage them for himself, for Pivovarov, for Sheludyak and Kudryavets who had been killed crossing the lines, for Captain Volokh and his scouts, and for many more besides... He pulled the stiff ring of the pin out of the handle with his teeth.

The cart was approaching slowly and it looked as though he had already been spotted. The German with his greatcoat collar turned up, who was sitting sideways on to Ivanovsky, was still chattering away, while the other, his forage cap crammed down over his ears, had already stuck his neck out and was peering at the road. After pushing the grenade under his stomach, Ivanovsky lay motionless. He knew that from a distance he wasn't conspicuous in his camouflage clothes; moreover, he had been well covered with snow in the rut. Trying not to move and hardly breathing, he lay still with his eyes shut; if they had seen him, let them take him for dead and drive up closer.

But they did not do so; they stopped the horses twenty paces away and shouted something at him. He did not move and did not react; he merely watched them covertly through half-closed eyelids; as never before throughout the whole of that night he felt the comforting round bulk of the grenade underneath him.

Without waiting for a reply, the German sitting on the cart with his collar turned up snatched up a rifle and slid down on to the road. The other stayed where he was without letting go of the reins, and Ivanovsky groaned with frustration. It was working out even worse than he had expected; only one of them was coming up to him. The lieutenant winced inwardly, everything went dark before his eyes, the road and the birch-trees by it veered to one side, but he hung on somehow to the very brink of consciousness and waited.

Clicking his bolt, the German on the road shouted something

imperatively and, the long skirts of his greatcoat flying apart, walked along the road. He was holding his carbine at the ready with the butt under his armpit. Ivanovsky gradually released the lever of the grenade under him and silently kept saying, like a prayer: "Come on, come on..." He waited, he was not capable of anything else. He could not throw the grenade at the German, he could only detonate it and blow himself up and the enemy with him.

That carter, however, was not a particularly brave character and was approaching him so warily that he seemed about to turn back at any moment. However, he still kept coming. Ivanovsky could already see the unshaven sleepy face, the alarmed look, the rime-covered buttons of his greatcoat. However, without coming right up to Ivanovsky, he shouted something again and halted. In the next moment the lieutenant himself nearly screamed with frustration when he saw the German raising his rifle to his shoulder and taking aim. He aimed inexpertly, painstakingly, the barrel of the weapon wavering from side to side for a long time. His mate on the cart was saying something all the time and was no doubt giving advice. Ivanovsky lay motionless as before, looking at his murderer with wide open eyes; tears of despair trickled down his cheeks. He had waited till morning and had met the Germans on the road! It was all ending so stupidly, so clumsily, so uninspiringly, as it ought not to have ended at any cost. What else could he do? Stand up? Shout? Put up his hands? Quietly and humbly accept that last bullet at point-blank range and disappear forever from the face of the earth?

He would, of course, disappear; he had only seconds to live, after which would come the Great Eternal Peace. In his predicament, this was even tempting, since it would liberate him in a trice from all his sufferings. But others would remain alive. They would be victorious, they would defend this green and happy land, they would breathe freely, work and love. But might not their great destiny depend on how this twenty-two-year-old platoon commander, Lieutenant Ivanovsky, died?

No, he did not stand up, because he was unable to, and he did not cry out, although no doubt he could still have done so. He simply shuddered when a single shot rang out in the watchful morning silence, and yet another bullet went into his blood-stained body. It hit him in the shoulder, apparently breaking the collarbone, but he did not move and did not even groan. In a final effort, he simply gritted his teeth and closed his eyes forever. With tremendous last hope, he listened to the footsteps approaching along the road and thought that it was possible, that all was not yet lost; it was possible and he would succeed. He still had a tiny chance. Slowly, very carefully, battling with the fresh pain that swept over him, he turned over on his side, releasing the grenade

from under his body. He released it just at the moment when the footsteps on the road had stopped nearby. He felt the stiff, springly jerk of the lever under his side and the detonator cracked loudly. The German shouted, evidently rushing away. Ivanovsky heard two footsteps and then he heard nothing any more...

A few seconds later, when the mingled snow and dust had settled, he was no longer to be seen on that road; there was only a small crater smoking in the wind in one of the ruts. Around, on the clean-swept snow, lay frozen clods of earth and beyond the ditch, face down, the long skirts of his greatcoat spread out over the dirty snow, lay the body of the German hurled there by the explosion. The cart was lying on one side with its straw spilled out over the road; a big bay horse was struggling in the shafts, vainly trying to get to its feet, and the surviving carter was running along the road to the village.

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Vasil Bykov (b. 1924) is a well-known Byelorussian writer, winner of the Lenin and State prizes for literature. He writes about the war in which he was a participant and about the partisan movement in his native Byelorussia which has suffered greatly from the Nazi occupation.

ISBN 5-05-002435-8